# APSReview@pmc.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the review of the Australian Public Service (APS), and for extending the deadline for submissions.

As background, I have been employed in the APS for 17 years, with over seven years at the executive level. Before that, I held occupations in the private and community sectors. I also hold a PhD in political science, and I have worked from time to time in academia teaching politics, policy and public administration. Both my political science training, my experience in the APS (chiefly in a central policy department) and the experiences of colleagues across the APS inform this submission.

The primary role of the APS is to provide expert, impartial policy advice and regulatory oversight, and deliver programs and services. It is not clear to me that the role of the APS is to ‘drive innovation and productivity in our economy’, unless it is through government policy to do so or a side benefit of our role as a neutral, trusted advisor to government.

In years past, the public service was clear about its role as an apolitical advisor to government, which served the public interest and Australian citizens. It was separate to, and ‘above’, politics. It is concerning to see the role of the public service, and the roles of its senior leaders, as being simply ‘to serve the government of the day’. This undermines the ethical and neutral, expert culture of the APS.

A well-functioning, principled public service is critical to democracy. To properly serve the public interest and Australian citizens means including the considered assessments, experience and expertise of affected citizens and specialists while policy and programs are developed, trialled and evaluated. This should include the views of political parties and interest groups, but it should not be beholden to those parties and groups alone – it should take into account the broad polity.

I have not addressed the overarching issues of governing legislation and architecture (portfolios and departments), as I think there are people with much more expertise who could provide considered advice on these issues.

## What works well in the APS?

Before outlining what needs to change, I acknowledge some of the past and current strengths of the Australian Public Service.

* The public sector tends to attract people who have a sense of vocation and contribution, rather than those who simply want to make money or build a career. There are many capable, ethical and hardworking people in the APS.
* The APS is now more open to professionals who have worked in other sectors or for themselves. Recruitment processes are not as prescriptive as has been in the past. This means there is generally more diversity within the APS than was historically the case (though some agencies lag). This brings fresh perspectives into policy and program development, and can help build empathy with the public.
* Alongside this diversity are moves towards more workplace flexibility. (Again, this is a general observation and some agencies remain outdated in flexibility arrangements). The APS broadly has incorporated some best practice management approaches (though this is not universal).
* Since commencing in the APS I have been pleased to see moves towards greater accessibility and inclusion, including greater accessibility of government buildings and websites.

**Recommendations:**

**Promote APS employment among the broader community.**

**Continue to recruit a diversity of citizens, and value experience outside of the public sector.**

**Continue to build flexible working practices, nurture best practice management, and recruit only those suited to people management into management roles.  
Continue to improve accessibility and inclusion for APS staff and citizens.**

## What needs to change in the APS?

It is difficult to discuss what needs to change in the APS without examining the broader issues of government policy on the APS. Funding, staffing caps and resourcing generally are all factors that affect the APS. This curtails detailed discussion of the way the APS does, or should, operate; however, I have still flagged these issues.

That said, an under-resourced public service is inefficient for citizens. For example, while Centrelink may reduce costs by decreasing the number of customer service officers, the inefficiency of thousands of people spending literally hours waiting on the phone each year would more than neutralise that cost. Many more people than those unemployed need to call Centrelink.

For convenience, issues of governance and culture, management, capability, technological development and efficiency are raised under category labels, but in reality they frequently overlap. A number of these issues also relate broadly to ethics. Lack of integrity, transparency and accountability around the APS would be best addressed by a federal integrity commission.

Some of these issues may also relate to an ingrained culture of risk aversion. While caution and risk management are vital to good public administration, some within the public service only see risk in the narrow frame of fraud or in risking their own careers. There are certain *perceived* hazards that actually may be minimal risks (such as diversity in recruitment).

### Governance and culture

* In recent years, appointments senior roles within the public service have seemed political. Many are concerned that avenues to politicise the public service are increasing. Agencies and departments need to be careful with their relationships with governments and ministers’ offices.
  + In two government departments where I worked, and under governments of both political persuasions, ministers’ offices pressured departments to present policy advice or findings in a particular way and with certain inclusions. The public service does not exist to merely give government what it demands.
* There are prospects of corruption or at least the appearance of corruption within the administration of some public sector organisations. The following examples of cronyism and nepotism are drawn from real life examples reported to me. While instances may have been legitimate practice and proper decisions, the lack of transparency around such arrangements undermines APS employee confidence that all is ‘above board’. It is also not clear where APS employees can report such behaviour without significant career consequence.
  + Agency SES seeming to appoint each other’s children to roles within the agency to avoid perceived conflicts of interest.
  + A Departmental SES offering permanent employment to a junior contractor whose partner offered a significant reduction in home improvement spending.
  + An Agency SES awarding a large contract to an organisation where their partner was working.
  + Colleagues of a SES promoting the partner of that SES.
  + An SES transferring departments and gradually transferring their team from their old department to their new department, without giving staff in the new department appropriate opportunities.
* More generally, throughout government there can often be a lack of transparency for both APS employees and the public. This destabilises trust in the APS as a public institution.
  + While open communication is espoused by senior leaders, at times some leaders appoint ‘gatekeepers’ for themselves. This drastically reduces opportunities for clear and open communication and creates the impression that executive leaders do not want to hear from staff.
* There is often a lack of accountability when information was deliberately misrepresented, mishandled or misused. Citizens have a right to expect due process and fair outcomes when interacting with the government and the public service (not necessarily advantageous to them, but fair). Many executives appear not to be accountable for even inadvertent mistakes or mismanagement.
  + For example, Centrelink provided personal information of a citizen to a minister’s office for political purposes.
  + An agency leader is reported to have provided information to a private sector organisation for political purposes, and is subsequently departing the APS. This could be perceived as a way of avoiding investigation and censure.
  + Recruitment panels and tender evaluation panels delay or avoid providing feedback to unsuccessful candidates, perhaps in the hope that they will give up.
  + More generally, senior executives may deliberately overlook a friend’s poor management practices or mistreatment of staff, or suspicious recruitment processes.
* Some employees within the public service treat the release of material under Freedom of Information as a golden calf. Documents are unnecessarily redacted to the extent of rendering them almost useless. Freedom of Information is an important element of democracy, and the APS should be as open as possible, rather than as closed as possible.
* Some employees treat community involvement in policy and program development as ‘tick-a-box’ chore. Consultation and involvement of the public in government decisions are important to democracy. Moreover, many businesses, citizens and groups have ideas, expertise and insights that can inform policy and program development and implementation. The APS needs to be open to them.
* Clear communication must be a clear expectation. The public service must be understood by its citizens. Clear, succinct communication is also the most efficient way of conveying information, and should be accessible in a variety of formats.
* APS employees generally could be more inclusive and accepting of diversity. While the APS has made strides in some areas, much more is to be done as judgemental and exclusive attitudes remain in some places.
  + In particular, the APS must lift its game in its representation of people with a disability and people who identify as first Australian. There are some concerning experiences reported. This could be explained in part by managers being risk averse. A large portion of staff in the APS have backgrounds where they may not have been exposed to people in some minority groups.
  + The APS could also benefit by leaders being more mindful of recruiting a cross-section of people from various socio-economic backgrounds. A very senior Departmental SES suggested staff ‘go and see where other people live, because we all went to private schools’ (an ignorant or ill-informed comment, in any case).
  + APS leaders and employees could also value the variety of skills and approaches required to make the APS work, and the knowledge and experience obtained elsewhere. No single person has all skills required to make the APS function, yet some employees discount the value of skills of others. There are many opportunities to learn from others, if people are open.

**Recommendations:**

**Recommend federal governments establish an integrity commission.**

**Train or remind APS employees of impartiality and clear communication.**

**Establish clear advice for APS employees on where they can seek guidance when they observe possible corrupt practices.**

**Remind APS employees of their duties and accountabilities to the public.**

**As part of government transparency and Freedom of Information, publish policy advice, program monitoring reports and other public interest material wherever possible.  
Encourage APS employees to view consultation as a way of improving policy advice and service delivery.  
Ensure communication from the APS is clear, succinct and available in a variety of formats.  
Improve the representation of minority groups in APS employment, and ensure a spread of diversity of appearances, identities, backgrounds and skills.**

### Management

* Currently, recruitment and promotion practices are artificial, lengthy and unnecessarily bureaucratic.
  + The current preference for panel style interviews means candidates do not necessarily demonstrate the day‑to-day analysis, practical or other skills required in the role. This process can also exclude diversity and cement biases. It is perplexing that someone suitable for interview is ruled unsuitable at interview stage. This can lead to a perception that a particular recruitment process is designed for a certain outcome for a particular favoured applicant.
  + These processes are not particularly time efficient, particularly if there are many applicants or many interviewees. In other sectors, shortly after interview one is offered a position subject to confirmation, which allows the successful candidate to make plans but also allows room for the employer to obtain appropriate approvals.
* Where speed is required, recruitment hire firms are often used, but can be problematic. The incentives for recruiters are to a fill a position quickly with someone who has certain skills, not necessarily with someone with other basic requirements such as an appropriate knowledge or with a background that may pass security test. Recruitment hire firms also seem to be used when particular political imperatives are in play. Fees are considerable for jobs which may not be long in duration, raising value-for-money questions.
* It is important whoever is recruited into the APS receive a proper public service induction for those not familiar with the particular requirements and accountabilities of public administration. There are important requirements within the public service that do not necessarily apply to the private sector, such as use of government funds, value for money, merit selection procedures, and use of government resources.
  + The use of Victorian public ski field facilities by its board with private sector backgrounds illustrates this point.
* Where acting opportunities arise, management should establish or review and adhere to guidelines.
  + Acting opportunities for more than a month should be advertised, at least internally to an organisation.
  + Where less than a month, management should share acting opportunities among staff for development purposes, rather than seeming to ‘pick favourites.’
  + Acting opportunities should not last more than a year, and certainly not past the recruitment process for such a role – for example, if an acting EL2 manager was not suitable for an EL2 manager position elsewhere after they began acting, they should not be continuing to act in that position.
* People management skills must be prioritised. Sometimes people are promoted into management on the basis of technical expertise, but not all technical experts have the people management and communication skills required. Open and professional communication is vital to good management. A greater concern is that some people promoted into management may have personality issues or fixed mindsets that render them unsuitable for these roles.
  + Ensure managers have the skills required and provide opportunities for management development, including skills to recognise the strengths and skills of the employees reporting to them.
  + Micromanagement is an enemy of flexibility and people development and must be discouraged and eliminated. The skills of managers and senior staff should be spent on strategic issues, forward planning, and people development, not deliberating or quibbling over delegated work or irrelevant information to undermine staff confidence, exert power or empire-build.
* Use data more effectively to assess management and identify issues. If staff are not progressing under certain managers, or staff have higher numbers of working hours, leave days, and employee assistance program use under particular managers, this could point to poor management ability or practice.
* In addition, performance assessment of employees should be standardised across the APS. Performance assessment should be kept simple: needs development, meeting requirements, or ready for promotion. Other performance measures are invariably subjective, especially when conducted by others without matching expert knowledge, specialist skills or management capability.

**Recommendations:**

**Review recruitment and promotion processes and practices.  
Review the use of recruitment hire firms.**

**Ensure an appropriate public service induction, particularly for those without knowledge or experience of public administration.**

**Review arrangements around acting opportunities.**

**Prioritise people management skills and open communication, and discourage micromanagement.  
Use data more effectively to assess management performance.  
Standardise performance monitoring and measurement across the public service, and keep it simple.**

### Capability

* The APS could be more agile by making mobility between agencies much easier. Sometimes APS staff at different agencies may wish, and be more suited, to work at each other’s agency. There is currently not a simple way to make this happen.
* The APS should be continually building and matching the skills and interests of staff to roles to help employees have an opportunity to fulfil their potential.
  + On the job, ongoing training and continuous development opportunities can build the skills of employees, but it depends on a good manager with skills to develop people and build their confidence.
  + Some staff may be placed in roles and expected to do tasks which do not properly use their skills. This is a waste of their existing skills. Moreover, some APS staff may have developed skills through study, outside employment or volunteer roles that may not generally be known to their employer. APS leaders should be wary of ‘pigeonholing’ staff, which demonstrates the managers have a fixed mindset or particular biases.
  + Many times, employee capability does not match their classification. Good ideas and important insights can come from any level.
* The APS must think about policy and program evaluation at the design stage. In policy design, implementation and evaluation, the public service must design for citizens, not government.
  + Policy evaluation should not be cherry-picking information after policy implementation. Such a strategy seems to be completed for political purposes to justify a decision to continue or abolish the policy or program.
* The APS needs to think more often about how a policy or program will not work, not just how it will work.
  + It was surprising that policy developers did not appear to consider how the home insulation program could be exploited. Whenever government funding for grants or programs is available, unscrupulous people will find a way to get their hands on it.
  + Perhaps more experienced, knowledgeable or diverse staff, or staff in other agencies might have seen the potential for misuse, or seen the intersection with employment regulation in another portfolio.
* That said, the APS should not be afraid to fail in a policy or program attempt, but should be afraid of complacency and atrophy.
  + The APS could make better use of policy research and trials (noting that this is subject to political pressures). Trials can be used test for issues and subsequently improve the policy or program design. The APS should also encourage governments to take a longer view so they can trial long-term, nation-building policies and programs, rather than making short-term policy with a view to reelection.
* The APS must collaborate across government to ensure as many relevant insights as possible are incorporated into policy design.
  + If the APS is to truly be ‘whole of government’, it must do what it can to eliminate information ‘silos’. Improved mobility programs would assist this. Keeping policy development only to those who ‘need to know’ can exclude the insights of those how have information that is ‘good to know.’
* The APS needs to manage its corporate knowledge through better staff planning, development opportunities, mobility, and record keeping. Open communication and willingness to teach and learn are vital to this endeavour.
  + The APS could use technology to better manage knowledge and information. I will leave it to experts to consider how this would be done, but in this era there are plenty of easy-to-use options that would help ensure corporate knowledge is not lost when a particular staff member departs the public service.

**Recommendations:**

**Develop and encourage a cross-government mobility register.  
Build and match employee skills and interests to roles to most efficiently use their skills.**

**Develop policy and program evaluation at the design stage.  
Consider how policies or programs will not work or how they can be misused.  
Make better use of international research and policy trials, and encourage governments to take longer-term views for nation-building policies.**

**Collaborate across government to incorporate as many relevant views as possible.  
Manage corporate knowledge better by making better use of technology.**

### Technological development and other adaptations for efficiency

* The APS needs a significant IT infrastructure investment and ongoing funding for up-to-date expertise – particularly in an era when IT and cyber security is a major public concern (evidenced by the significant opt-outs of electronic health records).
  + It is unfortunate that governments have not funded the APS appropriately to ensure it has the technological infrastructure and ongoing development it requires.
  + This should not be outsourced to contractors who are not as responsive as permanent employees. It is also important to maintain expertise within the APS.
  + Good systems are an investment and will save money in the longer term.
  + Effective cyber security is imperative if citizens are to maintain trust in the public service and government services.
* By and large, the APS should reduce travel costs.
  + The APS does not make the most efficient use of technology for meetings. While there will always be occasions where personal presences are warranted, there are many unseized opportunities to have meetings by telepresence or teleconference.
  + There is no need for differentiated levels of travel expenses for SES and other APS employees. Staff can pay extra from their own pocket for more elaborate accommodation or meals.
* Review the structure of the APS. The APS in general needs a much flatter organisational structure, without so many layers.
  + It should recognise specialist skills without necessarily promoting someone into management when they are not suitable; avoid having an employee reporting to someone else at the same level; and consider mitigating the pay difference between EL2 and SES. It is difficult to understand the drastic increase between EL2 and SES, especially when there often appears little difference in responsibility (for example, EL2s often attend Senate Estimates to support the SES to answer questions).
* Recruit more permanent junior staff. At present there are very few APS1 and APS2 employees. Meanwhile, APS6, EL1 and even EL2 staff producing material end up photocopying, binding and delivering it as well. These tasks could easily be handled by junior staff, particularly those who may not otherwise be recruited to the public service (for example, because of disability, mental illness, or English literacy issues).
* Use and appreciate the skills within the APS and the reliability, efficiency and dedication of APS staff.
  + Long hours should not be confused with dedication. Number of hours worked do not equal efficiency of hours worked.
  + Use APS skills rather than recruiting over-priced and under-qualified contractors. The APS often does not know the qualifications and skills it already has in its employ. It would be more efficient to use the staff already within the public service if internal positions or projects are advertised. Without such advertising, there could be a perception that such projects are already conceived to provide an opportunity for a contract for someone already in mind.
* Encourage governments to increase or abolish APS staff caps and employ more permanent APS staff, rather than thousands of contractors. It is clear that this is so that governments can make reduced spending assumptions in budget forward estimates and low spending on paper, but this fools few. There is a false economy in continuing to pay contractors for work permanent employees could and should do.
  + It means that staff members become expert in writing requests for quotations, evaluating tenders, and managing contracts, than becoming expert in the work that contractors are now being paid to do.
  + Contractors are usually subject to different governance arrangements. Moreover, without the training, transparency, longer term employment and knowledge management, there are risks that the APS may not be able to deliver the policies and programs of government.
  + The use of contractors also affects corporate knowledge and knowledge transfer within organisations, and stymies forward planning.
  + Contracting arrangements can also often be unfair to contracted employees, many of whom work for government for years. The lack of certainty means they cannot do their own forward planning in terms of home, family, education and recreation.
* Recruits into the APS should be appropriately supported by managers and colleagues. New recruits (whether permanent or contracted) are at times left to ‘sink or swim.’ The time value of recruitment processes or the costs of recruitment fees are wasted if employees leave suddenly because of an unwelcoming culture, unused skills, or a lack of support.
* Many graduates now complete one or two year graduate programs with tens of thousands of dollars invested in their professional development courses and the like. In fact, some graduate programs fund a diploma or graduate certificate paid for by their agency. This could be overinvesting in those who participate in a graduate program, as numbers frequently leave for higher paying jobs in the private sector or overseas once they have completed their program and received a significant investment in their professional skills and development.
  + In the defence forces, those trained are expected to return their investment through working a certain length of time, or paying it back.
  + Other recruitment or professional development initiatives may have a much better return on investment.
* Take a long‑term, strategic view when prioritising value-for-money in relation to staff, resource and infrastructure and planning. Some decisions stand the test of time; many do not.

**Recommendations:**

**Invest in IT infrastructure and skills for the longer term for public trust, better services and to maintain public sector expertise.**

**Reduce travel costs by using technology and equalising SES travel allowances with allowances of APS and EL staff.  
Review the structure of the APS and reduce layers for a flatter structure.  
Recruit more permanent junior staff who can undertake volumes of simpler tasks for more senior staff whose value is working on more complex issues.  
Use skills within the APS for short-term projects, rather than awarding high-cost contracts to under-qualified contractors.  
Encourage governments to employ more permanent APS employees, rather than the false economy of contractors.  
Support new APS employees appropriately so they do not quickly leave the public service for other employment, wasting the cost of recruitment, on-the-job training and professional development.  
Review whether graduate programs are value for money, and consider payback and alternative recruitment options.  
Take a long-term, strategic view of value-for-money.**

## A final point on democracy

This century, we can see important elements of democracy being debased and stripped. Media is on the way to abandoning its role as the ‘fourth estate’ that holds governments to account, as governments make funding decisions and regulations to favour themselves and their party donors. The rule of law is at risk of being undermined when politicians treat laws and important conventions with contempt. Transparency, accountability, freedom of information, community involvement in the design of government services, and fairness in process and outcomes are essential if the APS is to help maintain and support the foundation principles of our society.