**Submission to APS Review**

These comments are based on my experience as a permanent and contract employee in five Australian Government departments and agencies at the APS5, APS6 and EL1 levels from 1998 to the present time. I have also studied public administration at tertiary level and was employed by the Royal Institute of Public Administration in London in the 1980s.

As an overall observation, I would note that just about everything in the APS is worse now than it was 20 years ago, and that includes the quality of management, culture, and systems.

1. I have seen over the past 20 years an erosion in expertise within the public service. It is now rare to find a ‘subject specialist’. Where these do still exist, they are not valued for their knowledge and expertise but are inevitably called upon to spend their time performing generic-type functions, while outside consultants are paid to provide the necessary information and analysis.
2. This is part of an overall problem of employee skills not being utilised to a maximum, or even to an appropriate, extent. There are too many instances of staff not being used to do what they are good at but being asked to do what they are not trained for, not good at, don’t know and are not interested in, while someone else could do these things more efficiently and effectively. Examples would be the transfer of time-consuming administrative duties and procurement responsibilities to policy officers.
3. The whole issue of ‘knowledge translation’ needs a cold, hard re-examination. The situation that we have at present seems to be characterised by consultants being used to do what public servants used to do, and should be able to do, if only they had access to the right information.

At the moment, we have public servants who are expected to make decisions and provide advice based on little or no information. This gives rise to increased power and influence of consultants and of lobbyists. A better system is needed. I support the view that, “If we want to maximize the impact of research on policy and practice, we should move from deploying individual ‘brokers’ to embracing the collective process of ‘brokering’ supported at the organizational and policy levels.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The consequences of this lack of knowledge can be serious. As Ian McAuley,

Lecturer in Public Sector Finance at the University of Canberra has noted in relation to the Australian Government’s failed home insulation program:

A problem clearly identified in the Auditor-General’s report, and emerging from the commission’s inquiries, is that the public servants involved simply did not realise that ceilings are risky places to work. Even if they had not heard of the [three previous deaths in New Zealand involving foil insulation secured with metal staples](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/19/foil-insulation-given-go-ahead-despite-three-deaths-in-new-zealand), the presence of life-threatening risk should have been common knowledge within the bureaucracy.

One might expect these public servants to understand high school physics such as [Ohm’s Law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohm%27s_law) and the basic principles of conductivity and thermodynamics – or at the very least, to know better than to send workers into roof spaces armed with metal staples.

As Tim Roxburgh of the Centre for Policy Development [points out](http://cpd.org.au/2012/09/public-works-public-skills), the Commonwealth public service has lost many of the practical skills once found in outfits such as departments of public works. Practical men and women have been replaced in the senior bureaucratic ranks by generic managers, with finely honed political sensitivity, and skill in writing speeches for ministers.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I would also strongly suspect that even if the public servants concerned had realised the limitations of their knowledge, they may have been trapped by another peculiarity of the system: the inability to seek information from outside experts if this means revealing that the Government is actually looking at something or that it needs help in working out how to do something. I have often been in this situation – where obtaining outside information would have been extremely helpful, but it was not allowed because doing so would have revealed what the Government was considering or working on.

1. The flip side of this issue is the problem of information and advice from public servants who *do* know things not being able to make their way up to senior decision-makers and the Minister. In this way, the current problems with the MyHealth Record project reflect a debacle similar to that of the home insulation program in the sense that they were both big-vision projects which fell victim to poor decision making at various levels, but in different ways.

In the case of MyHealth record, any number of public servants in the relevant ‘line areas’ could have seen (and did foresee) the mess which is currently unfolding, where many health care providers and patients are not convinced that the benefits of participation outweigh the potential costs or risks. It was clear some years ago that those at senior levels who had made, and who continued to make, decisions about the project, were steering the project into an inevitable disaster by not taking sufficient account of, and addressing, public and health care provider concerns.

The public understandably finds it incredulous that a major national initiative such as this was not subject to the most rigorous tests in terms of privacy of information, and was not the subject of an extensive national information campaign, including print and broadcast media and explanatory letters to every household. I feel certain that the public servants involved would have advised (if they had been asked) that such an extensive campaign be undertaken.
2. All of the above issues also relate to the oft-acknowledged fact that what matters in the APS is process, not outcomes. Every public servant knows that the outcomes don’t matter as long as you get the process right. This obviously creates its own issues, which result in the Australian public being seriously short-changed, and which have doubtless been written about extensively.

These issues could perhaps be forgiven if the processes were smooth, efficient, well-designed and therefore likely to facilitate good and defensible outcomes. This is, unfortunately, not the case.

There are too many instances of departmental processes being plagued by absurdities, inefficiencies, delays, and downright bad design. Examples from my current department include the procurement system, the Parliamentary Document Management System (PDMS), and SAP ESS (employee self-service portal). To say that these are not user-friendly would be an understatement; it is questionable whether some have even been designed to even meet users’ needs. Staff constantly feels that they exist to meet the needs of these systems rather than the systems existing to meet the needs of staff. Enormous amounts of time (with consequent impact on public money) are wasted trying to meet the requirements of these systems – not because they add value to the work being done, but because it is necessary to follow the process, whether or not it makes sense.

In my current department, there is a Procurement Advisory Service (PAS) which is staffed by people with high-level knowledge and understanding of the procurement process. However, responsibility for initiating and managing procurements has been devolved to ‘line areas’ -- i.e., policy and program officers. The system is so complex and time-consuming, that, given the line area’s other responsibilities, it took 4 months from the time a limited tender procurement was initiated to the time that it was issued. During this time, officers from the line area were on the phone to PAS on an almost daily basis for information, advice and clarifications. The costs of the system are enormous, but hidden.

Under a different system, I would estimate that the amount of time required could have been reduced by 75% -- for example, if a centralised procurement area had primary responsibility for managing the procurement with input from the line area.

When I asked a PAS officer recently if the procurement system had been reviewed, she told me, “That’s our job!” and then acknowledged that they had a list of about 70 refinements that they believed were necessary. When I asked why these could not be implemented, she said, “Because we’ve been told that it would cost just over a million dollars, and that money isn’t being made available.” Talk about short-sighted savings!
3. The value of $1 million to address a wildly inefficient and costly system also needs to be viewed in the context of what departments *are* willing to spend money on. There are Divisions within my Department that are unwilling to provide funding support to allow APS staff to access external professional training and development opportunities such as external conferences, forums and workshops, so that staff either do not attend or must meet all expenses themselves – while at the same time spending many thousands of dollars per person for senior staff to attend extremely costly events in remote locations.

The failure to invest in staff development has significant consequences in terms of making policy development and program management more isolated and less connected to researchers and practitioners.
4. The quality of policy development and Ministerial advice also suffers because of the ‘siloed’ way that the APS goes about doing things. For many issues – especially for complex, multi-faceted ‘wicked’ problems such as obesity and Indigenous health – cross-portfolio working groups or task forces would be a more effective approach than single-department responsibilities in terms of obtaining the necessary ‘buy-in’ from relevant departments and agencies. For many of these issues, effective multi-level structures are needed which involve the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and non-government agencies. The APS is not particularly good at identifying best-practice models for things like this, nor even at listening to advice from well-informed Australian academics.
5. Another thing that has been sadly apparent is the reduction in the quality of management and leadership at the section head (EL2), Branch Head (Assistant Secretary), and Division Head (First Assistant Secretary) levels in at least some Departments. It is difficult to say whether this is due to a lack of training or a lack of temperament, or both, but there are reasons that so many public servants take stress leave, and the quality of management has a lot to do with it. For many of those who do not take stress leave but who continue to plod on, the failings in management and leadership result in demoralised and uninspired workers.
6. Finally, I would also like to highlight the serious erosion of the culture of public service departments to ‘walk and talk’ and lead by example. This is largely at failure at the First Assistant Secretary and Secretary level. There was a time, not so long ago, when Government Departments took seriously their roles as employers and understood the hypocrisy of asking others in the community to do what they were not prepared to do themselves. Hence, for example, we had the Australian Department of Health take a leadership role in the mid-1980s in implementing rules about no smoking in the workplace. That level of awareness, responsibility and leadership has now disappeared, however, leaving its place a conspicuous absence of best-practice policies and practices.

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1. R Kislov, P Wilson, and R Boaden, 2017, The ‘dark side’ of knowledge brokering, J Health Serv Res Policy, Apr; 22(2): 107–112. At: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5347355/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ian McAuley, ‘Rudd humbled, but real lessons of insulation scheme go unlearned’, The Conversation, 15 May 2014. At: <https://theconversation.com/rudd-humbled-but-real-lessons-of-insulation-scheme-go-unlearned-26711> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)