Independent Review of the Australian Public Service 2018

Submission

I joined the APS in 1980, and in the 38 years since I’ve worked in a variety of agencies, roles and levels. I’ve seen wage freezes, recruitment freezes, the rise of office computing, small and large outsourcing, the sale of large Commonwealth assets, many changes and reversals of government direction and policy. Through all of those years, in my experience most public servants whether in a long term job or on a short term contract are trying to do the best for their agency and clients.

If any government wants a public service “to innovate, collaborate, and to use data and technology more effectively”, then it must properly fund the APS to both maintain current services and implement change projects. The salary cap and efficiency dividend do not help with this.

The current staffing cap limits the APS to 2007 staffing levels. But in the 11 years since then, Australia’s population has grown by four million, about 19%. Agencies and departments are being given larger budgets but are being artificially handicapped by the staffing cap. Agencies have to contract additional short term staff, which is inefficient, and doesn’t build corporate knowledge or memory. Remove the staffing cap.

The efficiency dividend is a crude and blunt instrument to drive down costs, rather than using this government should be prepared to target the services and agencies that they want to fund or reduce funding to.

Decentralised wage negotiation in the APS seems like a huge waste of money to me, there should be and is no difference between an APS6 in one agency compared to another. Recentralise salary and conditions, and set wages by comparison to similar roles in private enterprise or other public service organisations.

Much of the public service’s work is bound by rules and regulations to ensure transparency, value for money and merit selection. As I think citizens would expect. But in at least one area of government all of this is thrown out the window. In my own agency at least $45m is spent each year on salaries for statutory appointees. Across the public service it must be many hundreds of millions of dollars.

These appointments are not transparent, seem to have no basis in merit selection and are entirely at the behest of the government of the day. Back in the mid 2000’s , then Attorney General Robert McClelland made changes to put some of these appointments on a more transparent and merit based basis, but these changes have lapsed and been replaced by a ‘jobs for the boys’ approach that is completely out of keeping with the ethos and approach of the rest of the APS. An open merit based process for statutory appointments should be introduced.