Independent Review of the APS

As a current member of the Australian Public Service (APS) I felt it necessary to contribute a submission to the review for consideration. I have been in the APS since 2007, working for the Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO) and its new iteration Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group (CASG). Before that I was a contractor to Defence for nearly 5 years, and before that a member of the RAAF for 20 years. I therefore have a very long association with working for the government.

The APS has, since its inception, the responsibility of using the Australian tax payer’s money efficiently and effectively to deliver the services needed to keep the Australian nation functional. Providing those services is its prime responsibility.

In delivering those services it is also responsible to provide apolitical, frank and fearless advice to the government of the day. It is able to do this because of the experience and expertise built up over years within the service.

From my perspective within Defence, over the last 10 to 15 years it has become increasingly difficult for these two responsibilities to be delivered. More and more work is being outsourced to publicly listed major service providers, known as Prime Contractors, and their subcontractors. The prime responsibility of a publicly listed company is to provide a return to its shareholders. Everything else is secondary, including the services it is being paid to provide which it will do as cost effectively as possible. The service may be good, but when its prime responsibility is its shareholders, its customers must come second. As stated above, the APS’ prime responsibility is delivery of service, meaning its customers come first.

As for delivering apolitical, frank and fearless advice to the government, how is this possible when the government of the day is appointing department heads who may be coming from industry, and thus have no public service experience. For self-preservation they are needing to tell the government what they want to hear for fear of losing their job. Department heads need to be appointed independent of the government and come from within the APS. This is the only way they can remain apolitical, and thus deliver frank and fearless advice.

Over the last 10 – 15 years there has been an increasing push for increased productivity, and the Terms of Reference for this review repeat it. Not once has the definition of productivity within the APS been defined, let alone measured. The bargaining framework which the APS have been forced to negotiate pay and conditions under is a prime example. Productivity is constantly mentioned, yet arbitrary parameters are prescribed, such as doing the same work with less people as a result of government cuts to personnel is not deemed to be a productivity improvement, but working longer hours is. The APS does not manufacture materiel, so industry definitions of productivity are not applicable.

One of the objectives of this review is for the APS to “be an employer of choice”. As an APS level 5 I use to receive an above average wage. As a result of the last round of workplace bargaining my wage is now below the average. I remain in the APS because I believe what I do is important; I do not see the APS as being “an employer of choice” when I don’t feel valued by an employer who spends so much time criticizing the APS and cutting staff.

The Terms of Reference state “the APS has to transform to meet the challenges of a digitally-enabled economy. This means improving the capacity of the APS to innovate, collaborate, and to use data and technology more effectively.” How is this possible when all the IT departments within the APS have been, or are being outsourced to industry? How is this possible when all new capability is being provided and then managed and maintained by profit driven companies? The APS are losing the ability to even understand what a digitally-enabled economy is. All the APS are learning is how to write and manage contracts, and have someone tell them what a digitally-enable economy is; the ability to differentiate between fact and fiction is disappearing.

The reviews and reforms that have been forced on the APS have been done so by getting a profit driven contractor to come in and then proceed to tell the APS how it can improve. What does an outside company know about the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (PGPA) Act or the Commonwealth Procurement Rules which the APS are required to abide by? What does the former head of a publicly listed company know about providing a service? They know how to deliver a profit to their shareholders.

Listed as a Scope of Review is “ensuring our domestic, foreign, trade and security interests are coordinated and well managed”. How is this to be achieved by a multi-national publicly listed company? Where is their parent company situated? The APS have no foreign interests and so are able to ensure Australia’s interests are protected and promoted.

Also listed as a Scope of Review, is “how the APS monitors and measures performance”. This sounds like a means to finding an easier way to remove underperforming staff. How about also looking at staff performing well? Currently there are no promotions allowed within the APS. If people are doing a good job and a position at the next level becomes available, that person should be given the option of being promoted into the position. They shouldn’t have to apply for the position and then compete with whoever else might apply. Every other industry promotes high performing personnel. Why not the APS?

Lastly, I offer two examples within my workplace where there is a very inefficient use of tax payer money, when the PGPA Act says value for money must apply.

* I’m an APS 5 qualified Technical Assessor, meaning I know how to designate a NATO Stock Number to newly acquired pieces of equipment. I earn about $74,000 per year. In my work place, at a desk not far from mine, there is a sub-contractor now doing the job. His company charges the Prime contractor $120 per hour. That’s $234,000 per year. Is that value for money?
* In my workplace an APS 5 person used to be an administrator for an engineering decision recording database. That task is now carried out by a contractor at a similar rate to above. That person is going on 4 weeks leave leaving no one to administer the database. Is this productive? When the task was carried out by the APS another person took over for those 4 weeks because there was experience within the workforce.

In conclusion, the APS has been, and should continue to be, the backbone of the government, and the interface between the government and the public. The APS needs to be treated with the respect it deserves, not as a political tool where the government is able to say it is saving money by cutting APS numbers, and then in the next breath say it is creating jobs by outsourcing. The 2009 Defence White Paper said contractors are the most expensive source of manpower and the APS is the cheapest. There are many overseas countries who have come to the conclusion outsourcing of government services have not worked and so are bringing them back ‘in house’. Does Australia need to repeat those mistakes to learn?