**Establish dissent channels to promote contestability within agencies**

Public servants are expected to provide frank and fearless advice to the government of the day, regardless of persuasion. In recent decades, the independence of the public service has been undermined through a number of key developments, including the reduction in the tenure of senior public servants and the practice of moving departmental secretaries upon changes of government. Fears of professional costs or reprisals at the expression of policy advice or views that significantly diverge from the policy of the government of the day are hidden behind euphemistic descriptions of “career-limiting moves”. Active steps must be taken to empower the Australian Public Service to provide genuinely frank and fearless advice, free from professional repercussions, to not only strengthen public sector workers’ rights at work but also to improve the quality and forthrightness of departmental advice.

In 1971 [at the height of the Vietnam War](https://www.thenation.com/article/the-history-of-the-state-departments-dissent-channel-and-how-trump-is-trying-to-squelch-it/), the US State Department established a Dissent Channel within the organisation, to provide civil servants a formalised means of expressing their moral and strategic objections to official US policy without compromising their security of employment. The Channel not only provided a means for employees to put their ethical positions on the record, but to also provide warnings about potential ‘blind spots’ and failures in official policy, and to provide alternative policy perspectives. Since its establishment, the Dissent Channel has been used by State Department staff at various turning points in US foreign policy, most notably in recent years to register opposition to President Trump’s executive orders on refugees and [the 2003 invasion of Iraq](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-02-03/dissent-us-state-department). Currently, none of the Departments of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), or Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) operate a similar system.

The Review Panel should consider recommending key foreign policy and national security agencies, such as the Department of Defence, DFAT, PM&C, the Department of Home Affairs, and the Attorney-General’s Department establish individual Dissent Channels within their organisations. Establishing such channels would not only assert and protect public servants’ right to express moral objections, but promote policy contestability as well. Dissent cables would be provided to the relevant departmental Secretary and their Deputy Secretaries upon submission, with authors free to submit cables anonymously if they so choose. Cables would also be available to be submitted to the department’s relevant Minister if the cable’s author so chooses. Dissent Channel cables would be accessible to members of the general public under Freedom of Information laws after a period of 10 years, with the names of the cables’ authors strictly redacted along with any other personally identifiable information to protect the authors’ identities and professional careers.

Three years after implementing Dissent Channels within national security and foreign policy agencies, the Government should consider expanding the model to all domestic policy agencies.

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