For context, I am a former officer of the APS – who resigned at ‘54/11’ in mid 2013 as an SES Officer in the Treasury (after around 30 years service, primarily in that Department). My experience was primarily, but not solely, in providing policy advice.

My only objective in making a submission is to try to improve outcomes for Australia.

My submission covers three issues:

1. the attitude of some Federal politicians towards the APS;
2. the culture of a minority of senior APS officers; and
3. the need to review turnover arrangements for senior officers.

My view is the Treasury was (and probably still is) relatively unaffected (compared to other areas of the APS) by these issues.

Attitude of some Federal politicians towards the APS

As stated in the ‘Objective’ of the ToR for the Review ‘The APS needs to be apolitical and professional, agile, innovative and efficient.’

I do not think that the APS generally has become ‘political’ in an overt sense.

However, I do think that the attitude of some Federal politicians has contributed to a situation where the APS is generally cautious about providing ‘frank and fearless’ advice particularly in writing. Please note that: I am not advocating that APS advice is without fault; and I accept and support that it is the Government and ultimately the Parliament who are the decision-makers on legislation.

I suggest that Australia’s future would better served if whichever elected representatives comprise the Government of the day:

* seek APS advice in writing on all material matters; and
* is prepared to release it publicly (with appropriate caveats).

This should be complemented by the Opposition resisting the temptation to ‘play politics’ with the APS’s advice.

I recognise there is unlikely to be a way to legislate for these outcomes. Hence, one or more politicians are likely to have to show leadership and engage with risk for the above to be accepted as standard practice.

The benefits of implementing the above suggestion include:

* potentially better-informed and transparent decision-making and public debate; and
* an increased ability of the APS to retain experienced officers (who currently can become disenchanted with the way APS advice is sought and treated).

An alternative to the above suggestion is to establish another Parliamentary Office (akin to the Parliamentary Budget Office) to provide policy advice on material issues to any Parliamentarian.

If politicians are unwilling to establish a culture conducive to the APS providing appropriate advice in an unfettered manner, then I consider establishing something akin to the PBO is preferable to the status quo.

Culture of a minority of senior APS officers

As stated in the ‘Scope of review’ of the ToR: This review will examine the capability, culture and operating model of the APS.

Despite the APS and the SES having well-documented selection and behavioural criteria, unfortunately a small minority of senior officers consistently do not abide by these criteria. This can have detrimental impacts on significant numbers of staff where senior SES officers are the culprits.

I suggest that addressing this issue requires the most senior levels of the APS and the Commissioner of the APS to stand up and not condone such behaviour by not taking appropriate action.

In addition to this, I also suggest the APS introduce a general proscription on senior officers (including Secretaries) who move to a new role arranging for former colleagues to follow them (without very good reason).

This suggestion would: avoid perceptions of officers being rewarded for tolerating inappropriate behaviour; and be consistent with discouraging fraud etc.

Turnover of senior Officers

Another area the Review should consider is the rate of turnover of senior officers in the APS.

In some agencies turnover of senior officers is too rapid which can diminish ownership and accountability when key reforms to government policy/programs are introduced.

It should be mandatory for decisions, regarding turnover of senior staff, to also assess how the proposed change will impact on the delivery of initiatives, other staff, and key relationships with the community and other government agencies.