Dear Mr Thody

I take great pleasure in making this brief submission to the review of the APS which you are presently leading.

I recently sought and received a voluntary redundancy from the Commonwealth Public Service (APS) after 27 years of employment. Most of that time was spent in the Department of Immigration (now part of the Department of Home Affairs) and the observations that I make here are based largely on my experience in that organisation during that time.

Between August 2001 and March 2017, I served as a staff representative on the Department’s National Staff Consultative Forum (NSCF) in both Brisbane and Canberra offices. In that role I was exposed to feedback from a large number of colleagues at all levels of the APS, and this has also strongly influenced my thoughts as outlined here.

The strongest expressions and concerns which I received from colleagues in that representative role centred on recruitment, bullying and harassment within the APS, perceived favouritism and nepotism, lack of career development and lack of appropriate training In more recent years many employees have come to feel that they are not adequately skilled and trained for their roles or that the skills and attributes which they do have are not effectively utilised and valued.

I would put it to you that the APS today is in a sorry state. Seemingly mistrusted by government and loathed by the general public whom it is meant to serve, it has become an object of derision or contempt rather than pride or respect. Popular culture in Australia treats the APS as a subject of ridicule, as exemplified by television programs such as Utopia or Hollow Men, in which public servants are lampooned for being incompetent and hopelessly out of touch. After 27 years in the service, I am inclined to think that the public’s poor perception of career public servants is not without foundation.

I would argue that the issues I seek to highlight here are essentially long-standing cultural problems. These require structural resolution if the APS is to achieve the agile, adaptable and versatile workforce that will be required to meet the diverse challenges of the future.

**Outsource corporate functions that require specialist skills**

My first piece of advice would be that in order to properly address these issues, the APS (and particularly the Canberra presence) should first be drastically reduced in size. Government should outsource functions which can be undertaken more efficiently by private sector organisations, especially recruitment, internal investigations including code of conduct, and Human Resource functions such as graduated return to work. **These corporate functions require specialist skills which many career bureaucrats in the APS do not possess**. Throughout my career in the Department of Immigration, it was a standing joke among many staff as to how internal Human Resources were either incompetent, unhelpful or obstructive and inefficient. This is no laughing matter though when HR staff lack the skills and temperament needed to properly assist staff with illness and disability issues, as has often been the case. The Commonwealth government appears committed to improving employment rates in the APS for people with disabilities but these efforts risk being undermined by the employment within internal HR teams of officers who have no real understanding of disability issues. Outsourcing these roles to private sector companies with well qualified and specialist staff would surely lift performance in crucial areas of people management.

I would also argue that much policy development and formulation could also be outsourced to universities or think tanks which have specialist knowledge. Currently much policy development appears to be done by APS officers who lack detailed knowledge of the subject under review. As a consequence, many policy documents (including Procedural Advice Manuals) are written in a substandard manner and fail to provide intelligible instructions to front line staff. Given the opportunity, academics in the tertiary sector would have the communication skills and in - depth knowledge to contribute immensely to policy development.

**Streamline Recruitment Processes**

In addition to reducing the size of the APS, I believe the government should also streamline current recruitment practices. The outgoing APS Commissioner John Lloyd was in 2017-2018 quoted in the Canberra media as supporting the idea of using a person’s CV rather than selection criteria when selecting applicants for APS roles. Mr Lloyd expressed the view that a person’s past work experience can be just as reliable an indication of an applicant’s suitability for a role, as a detailed selection criteria completed by the applicant. I believe that adopting such a streamlined approach to recruitment would be worthwhile as it should enable recruitment processes within the APS to be expedited and finalised more quickly. This may in turn encourage more well - qualified applicants from private sector backgrounds

I would also argue that the current practice of relying overwhelmingly on a person’s application to specific selection criteria, while intended as an instrument of merit protection, actually creates the opportunity for recruitment panels to exercise favouritism. Recruitment panels in both Expression of Interest processes and Gazettal exercises often comprise Executive Level 2 (Directors) and Executive Level 1 (Assistant Directors) who ultimately make the decision on a person’s suitability for a role in their section or branch. Many APS staff feel that it is too easy for Directors and Assistant Directors to award roles or promotions to favourites and screen out other well qualified applicants on the grounds that they did not sufficiently address the selection criteria. In my experience as a staff representative, applicants who had missed out on such opportunities often felt that when they requested feedback, they received only vague responses and little meaningful feedback to position them for future success. Many naturally concluded that roles had been given to favourites and that the outcomes of such exercises had been determined in advance.

This issue could be partly addressed by outsourcing recruitment to independent (non APS) entities while at the same time relying less on responses to selection criteria and more on an applicant’ s CV of their actual work history and achievements.

**Facilitate greater inter-agency mobility**

In addition to streamlining both the size of the APS, and recruitment practices, I would support any efforts to make more positions temporary in nature, so that people could be employed for a set period of time rather than permanently. Enabling applicants to perform a wider range of roles across APS agencies, on a temporary basis, should produce more experienced and well - rounded applicants for future permanent roles.

This would avoid the problem of people being recruited on a permanent basis to a specific role or task that may have a limited duration, and then having no meaningful work to do but still being permanently employed once that particular role or task has ended.

There should be a mechanism put in place to facilitate easier movement between different APS agencies, on either a permanent or temporary basis. Presumably the APSC would be best placed to co-ordinate such a process, while working closely with participating APS agencies. Individual staff who wished to participate could nominate with the APSC as a means of finding temporary or permanent redeployment with agencies other than their own

Enabling easier transfers or redeployments between agencies would ensure that all agencies can draw upon a bigger pool of expertise, and appoint the best qualified officers to their vacancies, especially during times of high need. It would also assist individual officers in finding roles that are best suited to their core skills, and further developing their careers through broader experience. At the moment many APS staff feel like square pegs in a round hole; languishing in roles for which they are not best suited, unable to utilise their core skills in a way that would enhance their career development and prospects, and often unable to quickly move on to something more suitable to their skill base (especially if attempts at mobility have been thwarted by the favouritism exercised by recruitment panels).

The APS of the future will require an agile, adaptable, well rounded and highly skilled workforce who can respond quickly to diverse tasks and challenges. Leaving staff to languish in dead end roles that are not best suited to their skills encourages cynicism and disengagement and reduces staff morale. **Poor morale will lead inevitably to poor outcomes in service delivery**.

**Improve quality of internal training**

Another issue which requires urgent attention is the quality of internal training within the APS. Agencies appear to be relying more on e-learning (which is often made mandatory for specific courses but does not ensure good learning outcomes). I would argue that if the APS were downsized and its permanent footprint consolidated around critical functions that only government can best deliver, then this would enable all agencies to develop and deliver better training to their staff. Agencies could afford to deliver proper training, and not be forced to rely on e -learning as a means of staying within limited budgets. Additionally e-learning should not be used as a means for agencies to absolve their responsibilities to their staff. Many APS staff feel that while corporate type courses are made mandatory, they are in reality little more than a tick and flick exercise through which to meet APSC requirements or put the onus of responsibility and compliance back onto staff. There are no tangible learning outcomes, especially when many staff go straight to the questionnaires at the end of each course without reading the content. How can this approach lead to good learning outcomes?

Better people management training is also required for officers at the EL1 and EL1 2 level who often have supervisory responsibilities for multiple subordinates. Many officers at this level have no expertise in supporting and developing those in their teams and reporting lines, and are especially poor at giving constructive feedback. Training for supervisors should also include training on supporting victims of bullying or harassment, as these topics are the subject of widespread complaint throughout the APS. Unfortunately there is a widespread perception that bullies are and will be rewarded with promotions by their agencies. Rather than be condemned, it is a widely held view that their behaviour might be seen by their agencies as beneficial in achieving results.

Yours sincerely,

Gregory Moore

30 July 2018