APS Review Submission

This submission only deals with 2 points fairly briefly (although I think they are quite important points). I am a member of the public service, but these views are entirely personal.

**The importance of the different function of the public sector**

The first point I would like to make is that in any future development of the APS, it is important to keep in mind that the functions of government in which it is involved (both policy development and policy implementation) are directed towards different goals compared to those of private sector organisations. In most cases the primary goal of a private sector business is to generate revenue and profit for itself, to create its own prosperity. The goal of government, by contrast, is quite often creation of an environment that enables others (including private sector businesses) to prosper, whether financially or otherwise.

This is not to say that the public sector cannot learn valuable lessons from the private sector. My concern, though, is that calls for the public sector to imitate the private sector are often made without proper consideration of the key differences in purpose. Practices that have developed in an environment that is focused on maximising profit need to be analysed before being applied to the APS, to assess whether they are compatible with an organisation that necessarily has different values and responsibilities.

The APS needs to spend public money responsibly and be accountable for the results achieved, but the nature of that accountability is somewhat different to, say, the responsibility of a listed company to shareholders. And in non-financial matters, the APS has responsibilities in its dealings with the Australian public that are not exactly the same as a business’ relationship with its customers.

**The importance of depth of knowledge**

The second point I would like to make is that, in my view, it is extremely important for the APS to value, develop and maintain knowledge and expertise if it is to provide high quality, effective policy advice to government on complex matters, and to have the capacity to effectively implement policies on a national scale. I say this because I have concerns that development and maintenance of knowledge at the required level is not occurring consistently.

In recent years I have seen a number of statements about how the APS needs to be fluid or mobile, with APS employees moving between agencies to a greater extent. This is premised on the importance of operating as a single APS and of avoiding silos.

I agree with the goal; it is undoubtedly important that collaboration occurs across the APS with whole-of-government approaches. What I have concerns with is focusing on employee mobility as the means of achieving that goal, as it may impair the development of the capabilities needed to be effective. It risks creating a large number of generalists who possess knowledge that is broad but also superficial.

I work in an agency that, in my view, places a high value on development of expertise in the agency’s distinct functions. There is recognition that this takes particular training, and an investment in employees that will enhance the performance of those functions in the longer term while representing a shorter term cost. My own experience of inter-agency collaboration is that while commitment and integrity are present in nearly all APS employees, knowledge and expertise in the particular role of an agency (or part of an agency) seems to be lacking more and more often. APS employees do require general skills, but when collaborating with another agency I am looking to access knowledge and expertise that is not available in my own agency. At times I instead encounter knowledge that is not significantly different from my own.

Earlier in my APS career I had worked in areas where staying for 2-3 years made you something of a veteran in the eyes of colleagues, and my impression is that many parts of the APS have a similar culture. I would respectfully suggest that there are many areas in which 2-3 years ought to be seen as the bare minimum time it takes to develop the capacity to provide first-class advice to government in that particular field.

As stated earlier, I agree with the importance of the whole of the APS working together to serve government. I submit that there should be a stronger focus on this being achieved through being aware of, valuing and utilising the different expertise available in different agencies.