What is the point of the public service?

A submission from Public Purpose Pty Ltd to the Independent Review of the Australian Public Service (APS) July 2018

This submission to the review of the Australian public service is from Public Purpose Pty Ltd, whose principal, Martin Stewart-Weeks, has worked in, for and with the public service in Australia at state, federal and local level since 1978.

He has also worked with, and advised, public service thinkers, leaders and practitioners in India, New Zealand, Singapore, the UK, the US, Canada, Denmark and Korea.

In the context of the Review's scope and focus, this short submission poses ten questions to which the Review should either provide compelling answers or explain how the APS itself might respond.

Characteristics and conditions

The APS, in common with similar institutions across the world, faces a period of both great peril and high promise.

The peril is manifest in the threat of continued erosion of trust, capability and credibility.

The public service, through a combination of ideology, economic imperative and cultural challenge from a more diverse and plural landscape of insight and ideas, risks becoming increasingly irrelevant to the complex policy problems whose resolution it is expected to contribute and, often, to lead.

It sometimes feels as if the public service is an institution coming adrift from the needs, values and rhythms of the world it is meant to serve. A harsh critique would suggest they can sometimes feel as if they are moving in opposite directions.

But it is clearly capable of responding. There is no shortage of examples of great work, done well with considerable impact and benefit for citizens and communities.

The promise lies in recovering the confidence and capability to shaoe and lead successive waves of public purpose work, confronting contemporary challenges with a vigorous exposition of skill and endurance that continually sets new standards of public and social innovation for public value.

It is not too dramatic to suggest the world, and Australia in particular, needs a competent and confident public service more than ever. Nor is it too dramatic to at least query whether, just when we need it most, the public service is capable of stepping up.

Responding to a changing world

The review takes place in a context defined by a series of internal factors, including culture, capability, performance, structure and leadership, all of which are the subject of some of the questions which form the basis of this submission and which the review should be trying to answer.

The context is also shaped by external factors, briefly described here, and whose impact is a function of their individual significance and complex interaction.

Digital, data and design

The digital era changes everything, even if some of the day to day work of institutions, including in the public service, will look and feel very much the same.

The review has to get beyond the question of how digital can help the APS do what it is doing now and answer a much more basic question – what is the "theory of the business" for the APS in the digital era? What does a "digital APS" look like?

Tightly linked to that is the question of data.

Public administration has been in the data business since it was invented in China and Ancient Egypt and certainly since it was refined into the more recognisable form we are familiar with by the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of the 19th century.

But we've never quite been in the data business at this level of scale, speed and intensity.

Nor have we been in the data business with the capacity to draw on the kind of tools that artificial intelligence and machine learning, for example, are now offering. And we're only just at the beginning of that journey, whose progress will be shaped by a combination of investment, regulation and ethics and new skills we are still busy inventing.

The third "d" – design – often provides a link between the digital and data worlds. Design and design thinking offer a set of tools and capabilities, and a whole mindset, that puts users at the centre and thrives on an ethic of creative experimentation.

Fuelled by data and always arcing towards practical solutions, design is already showing its creative potential for service and policy reform.

As this trifecta of capabilities provisions a "new normal" across every sphere of life, the public service risks being left behind, unable to renovate its operating models be engaging fast and deeply enough with its new demands and opportunities.

Trust – competence, talent, legibility and engagement

The only currency in which the public service trades, like most institutions, is trust. And trust is leaking at alarming rates from most institutions. The public service is no different.

The trust equation for the public service stitches together:

- Competence (the ability to get stuff done, and done well)
- Requisite talent to feed competence for good services and policy
- The ability to make its work "legible" to those in government and the wider community
- And authentic engagement, a willingness to see "we the people" as an asset from which to expect insights and expertise the public service has reason to value.

A review of the APS for the next 10 years, and perhaps even further out, should have something provocative to say about how the public service curates the stocks and flows of trust on which it feeds.

The work of the future

Work is changing – where it gets done, in what combinations of skill and capability, with what mix of interests at the table and with what mixture of speed, intensity and openness.

In the digital era, with access pretty much to any combination of knowledge, information and, at a pinch, wisdom the public service needs to think about the right mix of structure, culture and capability from which to shape its new work and the new leadership that work demands.

At the same time, public work, whether or not it is done by the public service either entirely or predominantly (and that combination is already changing and is likely to change a lot more in the next 20 years), calls on enduring values to render it valuable.

Those values include rigour, ethics, due process, fairness, honesty, an ability to privilege the public interest and the common good, the ability to serve governments of different political persuasions and, increasingly, an ability to conceive of, and robustly defend, the importance of "public".

Policy complexity

The APS is at the heart of our national response to a range of big policy challenges that pose difficult questions we need to answer as the basis for a future that is open, prosperous, fair and sustainable.

For example:

- Ensuring environmental sustainability and the appropriate response in Australia, and as part of Australia's contribution to its region and the world, to climate change

- Making our rapidly growing cities efficient, inclusive and productive through judicious investments in physical, digital, human, cultural and social capital to sustain good lives, equality and innovation

- Adopting larger frame of [wellbeing](#) to tackle the causes of economic and social inequality whose unchecked growth feeds a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion and social instability, fewer opportunities for work, poor economic growth and declining individual and national confidence

- Rethinking education, health and social care systems, whose industrial institutional roots are increasingly unable to respond to changing demands for learning for work and life, preventing illness and promoting health, breaking the architecture of disadvantage and, when it is needed, providing adequate and compassionate care on a human scale

- Rethinking the [role of the state](#) and the contribution of the public sector to mission-led innovation and inclusive growth

There are other big questions of course – provisioning a requisite defence capability as part of a realistic, generous and confident foreign policy, determining and paying for a virtually limitless inventory of physical and digital infrastructure that, almost literally, holds our economy and society together, crafting energy policies that are affordable, reliable and sustainable, embedding Australian know how, invention and sheer cleverness in complex global webs of pure and applied science, innovation and manufacturing.

But whatever the list, the implications for the APS are the same.

What should we expect from the public service in terms of skills, expertise and insight to help solve these problems?

Even more importantly, will the APS have the culture, structure, mindset and capability to curate more complex networks of [collective intelligence](#) from across government, business, universities and civil society to fashion a distinctively Australian problem solving "machine"?

The role of the state and the purpose of government

The final factor is the most basic.

It seems difficult to address questions about the future role and capability of the public service without having some sense of the role of the state and the purpose of government.

Australia's public administration culture and practice tends to eschew questions of deep culture and purpose for a (mostly) admirable predisposition to focus on more pragmatic issues of practice, structure and operations.

That doesn't seem adequate to the particular moment in which the review, and the APS itself, finds themselves.

The APS needs a new ["theory of the business.".](#)

It needs to think again about, and the relationship between:

- The *context* it works in (society, markets, customers and technology),
- What its job or *mission* is in that changing world
- What its core *competencies* need to be to get that work done.

In that process, the public service needs a new theory, an institutional story, about its role, purpose and value in digital era.

That doesn't mean enduring values of public work should be jettisoned. Nor does it mean that "digital" is the simple and singular answer to every challenge it faces.

But is does imply that an answer to the question about a fit-for-the-future public service at this particular moment can't be either incremental or limited.

The review's insights and recommendations should have something to say about how the APS responds to these conditions and, in the process retains or, in some cases rescues, the combination of relevance and respect.

Ten questions

The review should answer, or help the APS to answer, these 10 questions which reflect the range and mix of opportunities, and risks, from which the future of the public service will be forged.

Context and conditions

1   Does the APS understand the economic, social, cultural and technology characteristics and conditions of the world in which the APS has to work over the next 20 years?

The public service has to manifest an acute, practical and constantly evolving understanding of the changing rhythms, ideas and practices that determine and shape the larger context of which its policy, regulatory and service design and delivery work has to make sense.

This is about a ["foresight" capability](#) on steroids.

The review should be clear about what those rhythms are right now. More importantly, it should offer some ideas about how the APS can become better at sensing and learning about how they change and how that knowledge infects its daily work of analysis and advice.

Role of the APS

2   What is the role of the APS in the context of those characteristics and conditions and how widely understood, shared and supported is that role?

It's hard for the APS to be competent and effective if its role – the reason it exists– is not clear and widely understood.

The task here is more than some legislative definitions and a few annual reports from the Public Service Commission.

This is about a lively and widespread engagement by public servants themselves with their role and the role of the institution they work in. That is partly an act of leadership and partly a process of storytelling and honest and effective communication.

Purpose of the APS

3   Is the mission and purpose of the APS clear, compelling, understood and supported in the context of those characteristics and conditions?

Understanding purpose – the difference that the public service is expected to make – is similarly a task that has to reach beyond mission statements or statements of public service values.

Understanding purpose is a daily task of conversation and collective discernment about the relationship between what the public service does, why, how it makes a difference and how those it serves experience that work.

A shared sense of purpose has always been a defining characteristic of effective organisations and institutions. At this particular moment especially, the need to maintain a persistent conversation across and within the public service about purpose, and therefore about value and impact, is especially important.

Relevance of the APS

4   *How does the APS retain or, in some cases, rescue its relevance?*

The worst thing that can happen to any institution or organisation is to lose its relevance for those it is intended to serve or benefit. Irrelevance is the condition in which change becomes impossible, performance declines and respect erodes.

Relevance in the end is a function of three things:

- A persistent mastery of content and expertise in the areas of work for which you are responsible

- In the case of the public service, clear signs of effective policy management and the ability to "campaign" for solutions to complex problems that are in the public interest, practical and affordable

- And an obsession with clear, honest communication about the impact and results that policy and service delivery decisions produce.

To demonstrate relevance, the public service has to be able to demonstrate, every day and in each decision it takes, how it applies its content and "campaign" knowledge and expertise to land results which demonstrably advance the interests of people and communities across the country.

Competence of the APS

5   *In what mix of skills and capabilities does the APS need to demonstrate deep competence in the next 20 years?*

This is related to the "public servant of the future" question (see #9 below) and is a question about how widely shared and understood are the skills and capabilities of a modern public service.

Do the public service and the wider community have a sense of the things the public service should be good at to be, and to be seen to be, effective and useful.

The question assumes some exploration of the extent to which those skills and capabilities that are expected in the public service form the basis for recruitment, retention and reward.

When public servants access learning and capability development systems for example, can they find the necessary opportunities to gain or grow the skills and capabilities they know are important for the work they do?

And of course, there is, or should be, a clear "line of sight" between the inventory of skills and capabilities of a modern public service and the stories about its purpose and mission.

Closing the loop that lines up purpose and capabilities is a powerful engine of motivation and engagement that, in turn, unlocks steady improvements in performance and, ultimately, positive impact on the lives and circumstances of citizens and communities.

Requisite talent

6   *Does the APS know how to access, use, nurture and grow the requisite talent it needs, both inside the public service and across other networks and communities, to do its work now and into the future?*

There are two dimensions to the talent question for the public service.

One dimension is finding and keeping the talent needed to turn mission and purpose into effective performance. In the case of the public service, that means talent in traditional areas like strategic policy and advice (in both of which there are claims that capability has been declining for some time), service design and delivery and effective regulation.

It also means talent in newer areas, not the least in digital, data and design.

The challenge is complicated by the unnecessary, but growing contest between public servants and political advisors about how owns the policy management role.

If short term "fixing" and the demands of political spin and presentation are privileged too often over persistent, patient and rigorous analysis, testing and evaluation, the public service risks being stuck in a vicious spiral of demoralisation, reduced capacity and what in another context would be described as the "soft bigotry of low expectations."

The second dimension is making effective use of the talent you've got or which is developed in the public service.

Are there situations where poor leadership, lack of information or a series of other obstacles result in great talent effectively 'hiding in plain sight" within the public service without being properly deployed or supported?

There is no shortage of work in Australia and around the world being done to tackle the talent question for the public service.

The review provides a useful opportunity to take stock of that work and to ask some basic questions about the quality and effectiveness of the systems, culture and practice in the public sector that impacts how well talent is found and used across the service.

Leadership

7   *How well do the current and emerging theories and practice of public sector leadership align with that leaders need to do, and how they need to be, in the future public service?*

Leadership might well be the most studied and least understood attribute of effective organisations public, private or civil society.

Too often, it feels as if the dilemmas and complexity of leadership in modern institutions have become "undiscussable".

Finding organisational contexts, including in the public service, in which a combination of honesty, emotional intelligence and an unflinching willingness to confront the gap that sometimes yawns between what people hear leaders say, and what they hear leaders do is rare.

The review offers an opportunity to set out a demanding framework for leadership development in the public service that engages new models of power and authority that can unlock performance and innovation, especially in the digital age.

It needs to embrace a leadership conversation that earns a reputation for honesty and authenticity.

It should set out the kinds of [leadership support and development](#) tools, platforms and support that a modern public service needs. And it should sketch the new leadership narrative for a public service whose dominant values are engagement, relevance and performance.

Respect

8   *How does the APS earn and retain the respect of politicians and the community?*

Respect and relevance are two sides of the same demanding, complex "coin" of reputation.

If there is a sense that the combination of skill, attitude and culture, leadership and organising ability are aligned to an ability to get things done and to come up with good ideas or a better way to deliver programs and services, respect emerges as a product of relevance.

Obviously, the opposite is also true.

If the public service is seen to produce insights and advice that either miss the mark or fail to keep up with new developments in thinking and practice in whatever field it might be, perceptions of irrelevance, that somehow the real work and progress on challenges and risks is being done elsewhere, erode respect.

There is anecdotal evidence that respect for the public service seems to be declining amongst some politicians, for example and some sections of the community.

I have had several conversations over the past 12 months, more than I can recall over the past 20 years, with senior public service leaders at both federal and state level, in which the work and skills of public servants have been openly disparaged and discounted.

Of course, not public servants are always as capable and as competent as they should be. And they and their work are certainly not beyond criticism and correction.

But if there isn't a core respect for the role and work of the public service by those whose opinions can be both supportive and damaging, it makes it much harder for civil servants to display the kind of motivation and engagement they need to be and do their best.

The review should test a little how contemporary sources of respect are tracking and, if they are not working, why and with what effect.

People need to respect the public service because of the difference it makes to the big risks and opportunities the country faces and to the daily lives of citizens and communities.

The review should ask some honest questions about levels of respect for the public service from politicians and from the wider community, and how and why they fluctuate.

Public servants of the future

9   *Is there a clear sense of the public servant of the future that provides guidance and validation to those already in the public service and those thinking of either joining or working with the public service?*

There are several reports and studies from different countries about the skills and aptitudes of the public servant of the future.

The inventory of capabilities that emerges is interesting. For example, from a series of reports that were the subject of two recent Public Purpose blog posts [here](#) and [here](#), these were some of the characteristics that emerged:

- Iteration, data literacy, user centricity, curiosity, storytelling and insurgency
- Collaboration: relationships between people and organisations
- Communication: with an emphasis on digital media modes
- Commercialisation: getting the best value from public, private and community sectors
- Control: ensuring legal, financial and democratic standards are met.
- Sense-making: getting to the deeper meaning or significance of what is being communicated
- Social intelligence: relating to others deeply and directly
- Adaptive thinking: thinking and generating solutions outside of the norm to respond to unexpected and unique situations
- Cross-cultural competency: operating in unfamiliar cultural settings and using differences for innovation
- Computational thinking: translating large amounts of data into useful concepts and understanding data-based reasoning
- New-media literacy: leveraging new-media forms to communicate persuasively
- Transdisciplinary: understanding concepts across different disciplines to solve complex problems
- Design mindset: designing tasks, processes and work environments to produce desired outcomes
- Cognitive load management: filtering important information from the 'noise' and using new tools to expand mental functioning abilities
- Virtual collaboration: working productively with others across virtual distances.

It's an impressive list.

The point is not to suggest all public servants should somehow aspire to an heroic embrace of all of those attributes. That would hardly be realistic.

But it is a list that should provoke some discussion about how a mix and range of aptitudes of this sort might pervade the public service in increasingly confident and predictable patterns.

By now, it should be getting clearer that the 10 questions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

It should be possible to link together

- A clear sense of mission and purpose, itself reflecting a solid understanding of context and conditions

- A tight connection between relevance and respect, based on competence and performance

- All fed by an ability to find, keep and reward requisite talent with the skills and aptitudes that a modern public service needs to do its work and deliver its value.

The Review to bring together its deliberations not only in a series of findings and recommendations but in a depiction of a coherent "persona" of the modern public servant.

Digital capabilities

10 *How does the public service grow or access the necessary confidence and skill in the use of new digital tools, platforms and capabilities, including artificial intelligence, machine learning and new approach to the analysis and use of data at speed and scale, for better policy, regulation and services?*

The final question ties back to the underlying proposition of this submission, that the public service needs a new (and an old) story, a "theory of the business" that fits the digital age.

If it's true that digital changes everything and isn't just making the way things are done now either faster or more convenient, then what we could describe as the "digital intelligence quotient" across the public service becomes critical.

In this context, we could define "digital intelligence" as the mix of skills, aptitudes, mindsets and culture necessary to understand, and confidently to use, the new tools and platforms of the digital world in the different contexts of public work.

There is some discussion about the extent to which the public service, not just in Australia but in other countries too, is growing and using digital capabilities at a sufficient pace and depth. And there are formal training and learning responses within the public service to address that challenge, including for example the GDS Digital Academy in the UK.

Given the central role of digital (and data) in framing so many questions about a fit-for-the-future public service, it's important that the Review makes some assessment of at least these elements of the public service's current and prospective digital intelligence:

- How well understood are the basic tools, platforms and applications of the digital world and their relevance to, and use in, the business of governing and the work of the public sector?

- Is the public service making consistent use of standard contemporary digital tools and platforms, including cloud computing, agile software development and project methodologies, social media and mobile technologies and platforms?

- What's the evidence that the public service is actively exploring ways to use digital capabilities and culture to rethink processes, programs and policy development from the ground up rather than simply to speed up existing processes and activities?

- Is the current and emerging leadership across the public service fit-for-digital-purpose in an institution that needs strong direction, persistent support and active encouragement to use digital and data in creative, sometimes disruptive way to improve results and impact for citizens and communities?

What is the point?

The question underlying the review is simple: in the modern world, what is the point of the public service?

It sounds a little blunt. To some, especially current public servants perhaps, it might sound disparaging and disrespectful.

It is none of those things.

The question is as basic and urgent as the strength and seriousness of this submission's underlying commitment to a future public service that is properly valued because it is extraordinarily effective.

Australia needs a high functioning public service of imagination, intelligence and insight now more than ever.

We need it to be unusually clever and resilient.

We need it to be persistently and regularly capable of outsized, often unreasonable feats of brilliance in the face of solutions to complex problems that, frankly, are beginning to feel beyond our collective reach.

We need a public service of nuance and subtlety to match its emerging mission to corral, and put to work, Australia's dispersed and diffuse assets of collective intelligence.

The public service is one of our most important institutions.

Its daily work continues to astonish and frustrate in equal measure. It scales great heights of intellectual and institutional insight and remarkable operational performance, especially under pressure (think floods, fires and emergencies).

But it can just as easily betray undeniable symptoms of fear, hesitation and incompetence.

Australia has no hope of grappling successfully with the tangle of interlocking public problems, and opportunities, which will determine our future shared prosperity, without the ability to rely on, and therefore without properly nurturing, an extraordinary public service.

So, what is the point of the public service?

In the light of the context and conditions in which we need, as a nation, to find an answer – a story we can believe in and which explains its role, purpose and value – it may not turn out to be as simple or obvious as we think.

The review is an opportunity to make a start on that task.

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