
The Australian Public Service: Still Anonymous, Neutral and a Career Service?*

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I would like to talk to you today broadly about the changes in the Public Service since I started to try and examine it some 25 years ago.

I recall the first time I proposed to Professor Gordon Reid that I look at the Public Service and the way it operates. He said, 'You won't get past the front door. They will be polite, they'll give you coffee, and they will tell you nothing.' It happened that the first meeting I had was with Sir Geoffrey Yeend. I was going to ask him about a topic and he said, 'What was it you wanted to talk about?' So I mentioned the topic I was interested in and he then talked for half an hour, answered every question I could possibly have anticipated, gave away absolutely no government secrets, and from then on, we decided that it was actually a very fruitful arena of research: trying to understand the Public Service and in particular the relations between the Public Service and ministers and that interaction between the political and the administrative arenas.

So it's on that that I want to talk today. I used in the title that sub-heading 'Anonymous, Neutral and a Career Service', which, after all, were the categories which everyone used to describe the Public Service in the 1960s. That is what the Public Service is—it's a career service, the people are anonymous, and they are non-partisan. They are neutral.

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I thought I'd start with a couple of comments that were made to the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration in the 1970s, by two people who neither then nor now would ever be described as anonymous. Firstly, Sir Lennox Hewitt—Hewitt was asked by the Royal Commission about the objectives of his department. He responded:

I have not previously encountered the suggestion of objectives for a department of state. The Royal Commission will presumably not need anything more from the department than a copy of the administrative arrangements.

Sir Frederick Wheeler was asked the same question. His comment was:

The function of the Treasury is to advise and assist the Treasurer in the discharge of his responsibilities. The objectives of the Treasury are, in essence, to carry out this function as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Now—in the days of corporate plans, in the days of ‘plans on a page for each person’, to quote Allan Hawke—those views on the role of the Public Service would no longer be regarded as normal. Indeed, most people would say that the Public Service should have a far more proactive role. And it's changed dramatically, obviously.

There's an alternative view, though, of the last 20 years. And this one came from a minister. He said, ‘Basically, the last 20 years has been a battle between the elected representatives and the imperial bureaucracy. And the elected representatives won.’ He sees it as a continuing fight for influence and power between those who were elected and those who serve them.

Now which of these visions do we want to describe as ‘desirable’? A battleground in which the elected representatives have won, or a situation in which the mandarins of the time were accurate, precise and entirely unhelpful? And those are the issues I want to talk about, and in the end I want to ask questions about ways in which we can envisage a future Public Service.

Firstly, let me talk about ‘anonymous’. If you look back over the last century, the person who was picked as Australian of the Century in the bicentennial year was a public servant, Nugget Coombs. If you look back on the 1960s and the early 1970s, people would talk about ‘the Mandarins’, probably with a capital M. Sir Arthur Tange, Sir Frederick Wheeler, Sir Richard Randall—all those people who, for a long period of time, dominated. And the one above all—Sir Roland Wilson who, for 15 years, was Secretary of the Treasury. Now they were the mandarins. We remember them because they stayed there for a long time. Was it necessarily a better system for all of that? Anonymous they certainly weren't.

By contrast, if I were to get out of the hothouse of Canberra, and ask somebody to nominate the senior mandarins of today, how many of them could they name? Well, ‘Max the Axe’ might be remembered more because of the neatness of his nickname than for anything that he actually did. After that I suspect that most people would have some difficulty naming one senior public servant today. So the anonymity has been enhanced, in a sense, for a couple of reasons: one is that people don't stay there so long—the notion of public servants in position for 10 or 15 years is something which is no longer

conceivable, it's not likely to happen; the other is that the image of a very small group dominating the Public Service is equally no longer viable. To an extent, the people of the 1960s were the few graduates in a service which up to the early 1960s never actually filled its quota of graduates. They were a highly talented small group in a not very deep field of talent. I suspect today that field is more even. Or perhaps it's just that I'm getting older, and I know this group, and the previous group we looked up to with a certain degree of fear or dread when we were younger and thought that the older people must be more dominant. Perhaps if I asked the current 25-year-olds, they would say that this set of senior public servants are just as fearsome as that other lot were.

There is a difference, in that nowadays public servants will appear before Parliamentary and Senate committees with a regularity that they previously didn't. They will be expected to answer questions that the committees previously weren't expected to ask. Therefore, in terms of the Parliament, they may be more visible and much less anonymous, as some senators keep pushing to find out who, down the line, made particular decisions or wrote particular papers. In that sense, indeed, their anonymity is in decline. And that's of course a political decision.

Those of us who were around Canberra in 1975 will not forget Sir Frederick Wheeler appearing at the bar of the Senate, under instruction to advise on the 'Loans Affair', and saying, 'My name is Sir Frederick Wheeler, I'm Secretary of the Treasury, and I'm instructed to answer no further questions', or something to that effect. It's interesting today that governments make no such attempt to gag the public servants who appear before parliamentary committees (We'll come to ministerial staff later). So they are more accountable—in the sense that more people can see what they're answering—but broadly, anonymous they certainly are. And they're likely to remain so, partly because of that minister's notion of a battle with the imperial bureaucracy. It's the way that the politicians and the ministers want it to be.

Is it a career? We have a much higher turnover of senior public servants than in the past. Let me give a couple of figures: of those appointed between 1949 and 1972 as secretaries of departments, 41 per cent served for ten years or more as a secretary of a department; of those appointed during the Hawke/Keating period, 2 per cent (which actually means one person) served for ten years during that period.

Look at the age of departure as well, to give a glimpse of the rapid change. Of that first group, the average age of departure was just under 60. Of the second group, the average age of departure was just under 52. Now that suggests that, whereas one group saw the Public Service as a career in which they rose to the top at about the age of 50, and stayed there for ten or more years, it is no longer true. Whether from choice—and occasionally it *is* from choice—or from rapid termination, a higher number of people now are moving in younger and moving out younger. And the Public Service—like, incidentally, most of the politicians—is, in a sense, becoming a first career. Now that's not due to a lack of talent going into it in the first place. As a university professor I see graduate students applying for Public Service positions, and the competition is horrendously tough. It's really difficult, and often you hear of 1200 applicants, all graduates, applying for about 12 positions in a particular department's graduate intake. They are getting really good young people.

Whether they are keeping them in the Public Service is the interesting question, because there is certainly a number who do not survive the first graduate year—they find it simply too dull. There are others who regard it as a very useful training ground before moving out into the more prosperous world of the banks and other high paying private sector organisations. So there is I think a thinning of the pyramid, not just as a matter of natural hierarchy, but also in terms of the talent which is actually available.

So—a career service? Yes, still, because most of the people appointed as Secretary or to other high positions are actually internal. We have comparatively few examples of good private sector people moving into the public sector at the top levels and making a success of it—primarily because it is a really different world they have to deal in.

There is a beautiful quote from someone appearing before a committee in Britain. One of Margaret Thatcher's high flying businessmen was musing on the difference between the public and the private sectors, and why private sector people find it quite so hard to make a success in the public sector. This private sector guru of Thatcher's said:

If you are running a business in the private sector, to be successful you have to be right more often than you're wrong: if you're right 51 per cent of the time, you're just on the right side of that line; if you're right 60 per cent of the time, you're doing better; if you're right 70 per cent of the time, you're doing well; if you're right 80 per cent of the time you're doing brilliantly. However, in the public sector, if you're right 98 per cent of the time, people are not interested in the 98 per cent—they're interested in the 2 per cent of the time that you were wrong. Because the 2 per cent will be the instances that people are concerned about where things are not being done properly, or not being done the way people would like to see them being done.

Therefore, I think the difference, when we were talking about distinctions, is that a public servant cannot say: 'I will not worry about the few per cent I get wrong,' because clearly these few per cent represent very significant items that people have to concern themselves about. I think that's the fundamental difference. It's getting everything right and being caught up on the few things that go wrong that make it so difficult for somebody from the private sector to move into the public sector.

The other difficulty is simply the political environment in which they are then expected to work—the expectations of a different sort, of anticipating desires of what ministers might want.

So we still look—and I believe that continuously we will still *have* to look—for the people within the Public Service to serve the ministers as public servants, and I expect that 90 per cent of top public servants will still come from a comparatively small pool of talent. That much I think is here to stay.

The third question was the question of neutrality. Is the Public Service more or less neutral than it was before, and what are the questions about its accountability to the Parliament and to the government?

The Public Service was never, of course, neutral between government and opposition. It's never been neutral in the sense that it could serve everybody with equal verve, whether they are elected or not. It serves the government of the day. The essence of neutrality is the ability to transfer allegiance from one side to the other if the people or the Parliament so decide. And that means that it has to have a reputation which allows incoming governments to be persuaded that they will be served with equal vigour and equal dedication as was the outgoing government.

At various times on both sides of the fence people have found this concept quite difficult to take. There was one outgoing minister who was saying goodbye to his public servants, and said: 'I must say, I find it hard to think that tomorrow you will be serving so-and-so.' And a voice came from the back, saying: 'What makes you think we're going to wait until tomorrow?' Transfer, in these things ought, to be absolutely immediate.

What service should the Public Service then be giving? And are the current conditions better designed than the former?

Let me start by saying that I am not advocating the 1960s as a sudden nirvana, in which everything was being done right. I think there were severe problems in a system which required a department to be abolished in order to move its Secretary, which was sometimes the case. I think it's a severe problem when ministers become totally dependent on their departments. When I was writing a book with Michelle Grattan 20 years ago called *Can Ministers Cope?* (we left it with a question mark, because we hadn't worked out the answer by the time we'd finished), we heard the stories of public servants who got ministers to sign letters, and the letters always went to a second page because that allowed them to change the first page after the signature was on the letter. I am not sure that that is a Public Service which we necessarily think of as desirable. Too-powerful public servants who can lean on ministers are as undesirable as too-powerful ministers leaning on the Public Service. There is need for some balance.

What is needed is good advice—but what constitutes good advice? Good advice is advice which tells it as it is, which accepts the parameters within which the government is working, which acknowledges the government has a set of policies that it wants to achieve, which appreciates that some things are likely to work for ministers and some things are simply not going to work, but within those parameters is prepared to explain to the minister what the options are, what the conclusions are and what the outcomes of the potential choices might be. It is advice that takes account not just of what the minister wants to achieve, but what the government wants to achieve, and takes account of what is being done in other departmental agencies as well.

Good advice is occasionally called 'frank and fearless'—good advice is at the very least 'frank', and occasionally perhaps it is carefully organised so that you can get the message across, if people are worried about the 'fearless'.

Do current circumstances for senior officials assist or detract from those sorts of conditions? Contracts and lack of tenure are the most obvious factors that have occurred over the last ten years. We need to be careful. I have been told of many occasions in the 1950s and 1960s when ministers ran secretaries without any problems. In those days, as

somebody put it, it was a horse and rabbit pie: one horse, one rabbit. The difficulty is determining which is which. It varied from minister to senior public servant.

If excessive tenure can make senior public servants too intolerant of ministers, excessive lack of tenure can potentially make them too nervous of ministers. Neither seems to me to be a desirable situation. You need at least to get some sort of balance.

This is made worse by the events of the last couple of years in which ministerial whim at times seems to be adequate to end the career of a senior public servant. In the case of the sacking of Paul Barrett, the Secretary of Defence, by the Minister of Defence, eventually the court case depended on the answer to the question: was the decision of the government in the interests of good public administration? If the interests of good public administration needed the minister to have confidence in his secretary, then if the minister has no confidence—whether or not, the judge says, that is a warranted conclusion—that is enough to ensure the legality of the sacking of that secretary.

I think that creates concerns, obviously, for secretaries, but also for *potential* secretaries. If promotion to that position means that a person can be removed very readily just because the minister, as one person put it ‘doesn’t like the colour of your hair’, or the minister at least chooses not to work with that officer, then the costs can be highly dramatic and often fatal.

Perhaps, in government terms, the idea of getting rid of the odd secretary can be done to encourage the others, in the way that the British used to shoot admirals. (Well, they shot *one* admiral—because he was very lax, didn’t act, and they lost Minorca. He was shot on the quarterdeck of his ship.) We don’t shoot them these days, we just sack them; the result is mildly more civilised.

We need to work out the best conditions under which the two can work together. It was interesting to note, when I talked to senior public servants and secretaries a couple of years ago for a book I was writing, not one of them was scared of their minister, and not one of them didn’t have a very good working relationship with their minister. But they all knew several of their colleagues that didn’t. There is something logically inconsistent about this. It was like writing a book on Malcolm Fraser. None of the ministers were scared of Fraser, not even the one who said to me afterwards ‘You’re not going to tell him what I said, are you?’ But all of them knew that their colleagues were scared of him. Again, it doesn’t add up. It either means they have a false perception of their own relationship with their minister, or it means they were just kidding me.

There is an increasing pressure on the Public Service, not just to support the minister, but to *be seen* to support the minister. Occasionally they are expected to talk to various groups to explain government policy. As one person said to me, ‘When I talk, I like to be enthusiastic, I like to get a good message over and entertain the audience. The problem with that is that people then think you *support* the policy, when all you are doing is *explaining* the policy.’ And that is a very difficult line to walk. Sir Arthur Tange told me, ‘I try not to be passionate, because if I’m passionate I can’t serve each side.’ I’m not sure that anyone would have said that Sir Arthur was passionate, but woe betide you if you got on his wrong side. He is the only public servant I have ever been nervous about interviewing.

So you have to keep up this balancing act—a degree of distance, but also a degree of understanding of what governments will do. What has made it much, much harder in the last 20 years is that the mandarins of the 1960s had one advantage which no secretary today has—Canberra was small and isolated. Australia’s informed group was comparatively limited. In the 1950s and 1960s, about 25 per cent of secretaries didn’t have degrees. Now, nobody doesn’t have a degree, and I’m told about 50 per cent of secretaries have post-graduate degrees.

It goes back to Duncan McLachlan, the first Public Service Commissioner, saying in an early Public Service Board Report: ‘You must be very careful how you recruit your telegraph boys, because out of that group will come your future secretaries.’ But he also said, of course, (and I’m almost quoting): ‘They all have to be male. Women can’t take the pressure when they get to senior positions. And anyway, men don’t like taking orders from women. So we couldn’t possibly have that.’ The last two telegraph boys who became secretaries of departments—although they got degrees on the way through—retired in the 1980s. So the impact of that view goes a long way through our history.

What has changed? First, these days think tanks spread information, and provide alternative views. If anything economic comes up, the Macquarie Bank and Access Economics is on television explaining why the government has done x, y or z. In the 1960s, the Treasury wouldn’t even let the Prime Minister have that sort of information. So debate was infinitely more limited, and that great fight in 1976 leading to the split of the Treasury was largely because Fraser wanted to get information and he couldn’t get it out of the Treasury at the time. So, whatever the reasons given, the actual motive was to try to break that monopoly on information.

Secondly, of course, the ministers now have staff—staff which are large, aggressive and policy oriented. When they started, the staff may well have been concerned primarily with organising the minister’s diary, but that’s clearly no longer true. It’s created a couple of fairly dramatic problems. One is that there is often somebody between the secretary or advising officer of the department, and the minister—somebody who is sitting in the minister’s ear, giving second advice, somebody who is often talented and may often be a public servant on secondment, who can put an alternative view and an alternative spin. That creates a distinct problem in the way that the system is actually going to work.

It is also true that those staff are, in effect, unaccountable. There are two conventional myths that exist: one is that anything told to the staff is told to the minister, and the other is that anything requested by the staff has been requested by the minister. Neither myth currently prevails in practice. They *can’t* prevail in practice, when large numbers of ministerial staff ask for information across a whole range of issues in anticipation of what the minister might like. Then they are accountable to nobody; not to the minister, because the minister cannot know, and not to the Parliament, because they are meant to be beyond the scope of Parliament.

I hope that one of the outcomes of the current Senate enquiry into the Members of Parliament Staff (MOPS) Act is that it is going to suggest a certain degree of accountability of ministerial staff. Not for the advice that they give to the ministers, but at least for what they do with the papers that come from the department and go up to the minister. What they do with the advice that is given, in terms of ‘Did the minister see it, or didn’t the minister see it?’—so that at least we have some idea of tracking the advice,

as used to happen in previous days when the secretary could see the minister regularly and knew just about everything the minister had. It would have been interesting to see how the secretaries of the 1960s competed with the ministerial staff, because the notion that they would simply ignore them just won't work anymore. Life has changed too much.

The question, then, for senior officials in dealing with ministers is: what kind of relationship can they build up? There is also the question of what services ministers want. Again, I will relate two nuggets of information, which I haven't been able to check completely, but which are interesting. A recently-retired senior public servant, talking on regional radio, *apparently* said: 'When I am asked for information, I give it. When I'm not asked, I think about it.' He thought about whether the minister actually wants to know that bit of information or not. Because there are clearly times when leading people don't want to know bad news or don't want to be able to acknowledge what happened.

I wrote a book last year on the Children Overboard affair, which was called *Don't Tell the Prime Minister*. It was based on the assumption that, during that period, the Prime Minister wasn't told of events because his staff didn't want to tell him and they anticipated that he didn't want to know, because it allowed plausible deniability to continue. There is not the slightest bit of evidence that he was told, but there is evidence that a lot of people around him knew the facts, and chose not to tell him.

The second nugget is the notion of papers coming back from ministerial staff annotated: 'not seen by the minister', when they contained advice being given by senior public servants *to* the minister. We don't know, and may never know, if that was the staff making a judgement or the minister saying 'I haven't seen that', in order to create a paper trail to suggest that the minister hadn't seen that information on that occasion. These situations are creating difficulties which no senior public servant had to deal with in the past. They are creating much greater pressure on the relationship between the two. Indeed, should public servants be asked to be courageous—as Sir Humphrey might have put it—and insist on informing the minister, or are they serving the minister by providing exactly what the minister might want at that particular time. Does it matter?

We need to trace back the notion of exactly what a Public Service in these sorts of circumstances is doing. Thirty years ago there was a royal commission in Canada, the Glassco Commission. It concluded, when talking about machinery of government (which you can equally call the operations of the Public Service):

The structure of the federal government must be responsive to public wants and aspirations, recognising the machinery of government is but a means to ends which lie outside itself ... the primary test of organisation is external and political. The internal and administrative object to make the task of Public Service manageable must be subordinate.

The Glassco Inquiry also says:

As long as the political system works, the machinery of government is the means to that end, rather than an end in itself, and there is a degree to which the public service is a means to an end, rather than end itself.

What we need to ask is what the requirements are for a Public Service to best serve a government, and to best serve the people through that government. In my view, there are certain qualities which seem to be lost, and which it might be desirable to recreate. We cannot, and would not want to, recreate the conditions of the 1960s, with an isolated government dependent on a very limited source of advice. We do though, need to worry about the decline in scepticism—scepticism used in its most positive sense, as in asking the hard questions, rather than accepting the easy directions. The ‘If that’s the way you want to go minister, is this necessarily the best way to get there?’ The ‘If you want to go to hell, then I can tell you a much better way of getting there.’ Because, in a sense, assisting the minister in his objectives by the best possible means occasionally requires challenging the objectives and the approach.

In the Children Overboard Affair, it seems to me that the Public Service failed in a lack of scepticism. It was too keen to look for the supporting evidence, and not keen enough to say, ‘Well, if there is none, then perhaps there’s something wrong with the story in the first place.’ It was too keen to say, ‘Well, minister, you were given that advice—I don’t think it’s true, but I’m not changing it’, rather than taking the hard decision to say, ‘Minister it didn’t actually happen’, and trying to live with that. It perhaps didn’t push hard enough, although pushing is difficult in a circumstance where the people you are serving are in election mode, and when you know—and they know—that they are going to be returned and your career is in their hands. It is very easy from outside to ask somebody else to be brave.

The pace of modern life means that the conditions of the 1960s cannot be re-played. We must accept the competitive advice. We must accept that the public servant is just one of several sources of advice which can be directed to the minister. We cannot say that a particular set of structures is necessary, but we can provide a set of ideas about how advice should be given. We acknowledge certain skills of the Public Service, which will be retained—continuity, expertise, experience, scepticism (I hope, in the terms I use it), managerial skills that appreciate the problems, a responsiveness to government and an accountability to ministers and, through ministers, to the Parliament.

These are indeed qualities that we would like public servants to have, they are the qualities that we look for in a public servant. Within that structure, there are a number of different ways in which to organise the advice offered. The problem is that too many of those qualities are currently under challenge, by too much competition—well, not too much competition, but too skewed a competition—from the people sitting around the minister. That group is not accountable enough, in that there are large black holes which the Parliament cannot enquire into. Let’s start with a very simple proposition: what the public pays for, it should be able to hold accountable. It pays for ministerial staff, it should be able to make them accountable.

For officials, the values in the new Public Service Act spell out what we want—merit, accountable, fair, apolitical. The question is, can we organise a machinery which allows that to be delivered, and an environment in which both sides recognise the value of those qualities?

My concern over the last 25 years is that we have lost some of the sense of value of those qualities, which seem to me to be desirable not for the benefit of the careers of public servants—although that’s obviously significant to maintain that reservoir of talent—but for the good government of a country. That requires that ministers *are* told clearly and explicitly the outcomes of potential policies, and that people work through with ministers the best way to achieve outcomes, and that ministers know when things are going wrong.

I doubt that the Public Service was ever, as some people like to claim, ‘the guardian of the public interest’. It would be wrong to pretend that it is so. But it might at least occasionally be ‘the guardian of the medium term’. There are people who would point out that in the long term every problem was last year’s solution. Everything that we’re now trying to solve was caused by decisions made earlier—even if they then went wrong. And those are the sorts of perspectives that I think our ministers need, and I’m not sure that they’re always getting them, because of the different sorts of pressures. We need to protect our Public Service. The government holds it in leasehold, not in freehold. The government, in my view, has an obligation to pass on to its successor—when one eventually comes—a Public Service that will serve an incoming government as well as an outgoing government.

The McLeod Report started by saying: ‘The Public Service is a national asset.’ I would merely endorse that, and say that we need to maintain that asset, and we need to continue to debate the best ways that it can be maintained to serve the country through the government.



Question — Do you have any suggestions on how ministerial ‘minders’ can be regulated?

Patrick Weller — What they are doing now and what they were doing when the MOPS Act was put in place, and when they started in the 1960s and 1970s, is completely different. It’s quite difficult to ask ministers to regulate their minders, because they actually serve some useful purposes. In one place, I’ve called *some* of them the ‘junkyard attack dogs’ of the political system—the people who would go out and kick heads on the minister’s behalf, and the minister will, of course, deny asking them to do it. On the other hand, like the Secret Service, they will take the bullet for the minister. We’ve had a number of minders who have acknowledged that they should have passed on information, but didn’t—and therefore, they resign. For instance in the Travel Rorts Affair, within the Prime Minister’s office two or three people left, on the grounds that this was the easiest way to defuse the situation. And a couple of the current Deputy Prime Minister’s staff have left for not passing on information.

There have been cases when people have tried to bring down guidelines for the behaviour—I think ‘training notes’ was the expression—of ministerial advisers, which aren’t quite guidelines, but are things they should or should not do. For instance, they should not ring up public servants and tell them they’re their boss, which they have done in the past.

Eventually the decision is going to be political. My view is that the Chief-of-Staff should be required to appear before the Senate to explain what happens in that office and what has happened to the papers that are in that office. That’s the minimum, because they are a group of people costing the taxpayer millions of dollars, who are otherwise not accountable. And if the minister doesn’t know, then the minister can’t claim that they are accountable for what is going on in his or her office.

We can try and spell out what is actually happening and what roles they should play, and not play. One line of thought is that every departmental Secretary sits down with the minister and works out at an early stage what the working arrangements with the ministerial staff are. In many cases, it works perfectly well—it’s the errant cases which create trouble, when they ring around departments and make demands or when they are cutting off advice which should be going to the minister, and isn’t. And eventually the solution will be ministerial will, because I don’t think our guidelines are going to actually affect the way things are run.

The advisers are a new animal in the game over the last 25 years. The current constitutional conventions barely take account of what they are doing. I hope the Senate might bring down some suggestions in its report, and then at least we can get a debate going. I think the Children Overboard inquiry illustrated quite how far some of them were prepared to go without, probably, their minister’s endorsement, and certainly in order to protect their minister against knowing things they didn’t want the minister to know.

I haven’t answered your question, because I don’t know the answer. It should be a matter of concern for everyone concerned with good government.

Question — Shortly after the Children Overboard affair, Andrew Podger was very clear in a speech he made about a year and half ago in saying that ministerial staff did *not* have any power to direct public servants. We haven’t heard very much since then about that.

Patrick Weller — Andrew is quite right, of course. The problem is, who is going to complain to who when ministerial staff misuse their position? I have heard of occasions—not in federal government, but in state government—in which a head of a department tried to sit down with a minister and say: ‘Your staff should not do this’, and that departmental secretary was found another job.

So it is comparatively difficult, when you are an Assistant Secretary in a department, and the ministerial adviser rings up and says ‘I want by 3 o’clock this afternoon all information on such and such, now get it!’ You don’t know if the directive has come from the minister, or the ministerial staffer.

Who is going to be brave enough to take on certain ministers? Sometimes you will work it out, sometimes you can't. This is about power, not good manners. It's about who is exercising the authority and the circumstances in which they do it. However much we like to say that it is not proper behaviour, it's going to be very hard to stamp it out—primarily because the political masters occasionally find it useful.

Question — You may not know how lucky you were in your first encounter with Sir Geoffrey Yeend—you could well have come away with a tray of lamingtons, having made a suitable donation to the Woden Valley Youth Choir. I don't think that that's a risk people run these days, partly because, as you said, the whole system is much busier now than it was.

I would be interested in your comment on the situation where the Opposition went to the last election with a fairly well-articulated policy on substantial changes to the way the Public Service would run and be accountable. And I'm not sure if that sort of policy is directed purely at a Canberra electorate, or whether it carries any weight in the wider Australian community. Does broad public opinion, and the way that might be reflected at the ballot, play any part in the way that the Public Service is run?

Patrick Weller — Outside Canberra? I doubt it. I think that, outside Canberra, the Public Service doesn't loom terribly large as an electoral issue. Inside Canberra, of course it does loom large, because you have a concentration of Public Service voters here, who might have some sort of impact.

I think that the target of the Opposition's policies on the Public Service are aimed primarily *at* the Public Service, who are going to be working with them if they win the next election, and therefore we are talking about the potential goodwill that might be involved. It might also be that it spells out what they anticipate doing on Day 1, and requires the officials to prepare the proper briefing notes in order to do that, as well.

But the Public Service's public image is almost non-existent—until such time as people have problems with it, and then it becomes a matter of complaint. By most accounts, most of the services delivered by the Public Service are provided much more efficiently and much more expeditiously now than they were 20 years ago. That's partly technology, partly a streamlining of the Public Service, and partly new methods.

Has this gained governments—of any sort—any bonus in terms of votes? I doubt it. People will still complain when the service they get isn't the one that they expected now, not compared to 20 years ago. So I think government is much more efficient now than it used to be, and I don't think it's changed many votes anywhere around the world, and I don't think it's likely to.

In a sense that's one issue, but the issue I'm concerned with is whether it is going to become a better service for the government and, through the government, for us. But no, it's not high-profile. It is higher in state politics, because it's more concentrated and that's the difference. Everyone is sitting there complaining, and probably voting in the same half dozen electorates.

Question — In terms of the changes in the way the Public Service has been used over the last, say, 25 years, do you think on balance that the changes have been politically motivated by the politicians in power, or more by the advisers and the roles that they have carved out for themselves while employed by these politicians?

Patrick Weller — I think it is the politicians. In a sense it is a two-stage process. A certain proportion of politicians enter government convinced that the current incumbent, who served the then-government so well, couldn't possibly serve them *as well*. My view is that there should be a period—and they tried it and it worked fairly well in 1983 actually—in which all secretaries were basically kept on over a period in which they tried to work out a *modus operandi* with their current minister. If after 6 months or 12 months that wasn't working, then the secretary was found a job somewhere else. That seemed to me quite a reasonable set of propositions.

The person who to me is the epitome of a great public servant is Mike Codd. He fell out about three times with a Prime Minister whose impression was that Mike couldn't possibly serve him, as the new Prime Minister, as well as he had served the previous one—once when he was working with Sir John Bunting in 1972, once in 1983 when he was pushed into the Industry Advisory Commission, and the third time when Hawke and Keating changed. Now Mike was a person who served the incumbent Prime Minister with great dedication and great skill over a long period of time, but the incoming people never quite felt that he could do as well for them. But he could have, and would have.

So partly it's suspicion. Then, in Opposition, they have had increasingly large staff, and they are the people who have often written the policies, they are the people the new ministers trust, and they are the small group who have been working for the previous three to five years to get ministers into that position of power, and *they* want to come in and put into effect what they've been working on. They don't want to go into the bureaucracy. They want to sit around the Prime Minister and say, 'We are now the people that count, here.' So there is a group there which has its own impetus for getting in there and getting things done in those first years of a new government. Also, with the increase in ministerial staff, so the staffers will become more and more involved—*particularly* as, more and more, being on the ministerial staff becomes a route to Parliament itself. What we have seen in the last 20 years is a 'professionalising' of politics, in that people go through universities and university student activism, they join the staff of a minister and manage work out a base in an electorate, and then go from there into Parliament. More and more often people are involved in politics, as a career, from a very early stage.

And being on ministerial staff is a great job—here are a number of highly political positions in which ministers want highly activist, committed people who are going to get in there and kick heads on their behalf. These are people who are entirely committed to the future of the political party the minister represents, rather than being public servants on secondment, although some of those officials, classically, go native and become extremely partisan. Just look at Britain and the people who worked with Margaret Thatcher. Two of the people who worked with her, Charles Powell and Bernard Ingham, were both public servants, though by the time she left no-one would have remembered that.

Ministerial staffers tend to be groups who want to exercise influence. They aren't there in order to keep the books, they aren't there to make the appointments—they are there to change policy. So they are a group of people who have grabbed the opportunity, moved into the vacuum and are now trying to exert their own influence. And it becomes a state of constant tension—whether creative or not—between the advisers, the minister and the department providing advice—and everyone else, of course, who may be trotting in on the side to assist.

I remember Sir Roland Wilson saying, 'Ministers can get advice from somewhere else, but five minutes on the run is no equivalent to being a full-time adviser.' What they have now is full-time advisers as well as the bureaucracy. And yes, they care, they want to win, they want to influence things, they've got the ear of the minister—of course they are going to try to expand their own influence. So it's a sort of push and pull exercise at the moment. It is very difficult to see it declining. I think what we want to do is discuss and perhaps regulate it.

Question — The situation now is that government heads and agency heads are able to sack people through the outsourcing situation. This has reduced the call on the government in superannuation for those people, and the whole object is to reduce expenditure and allegedly improve efficiency in the Public Service. This has brought a lot of trial and tribulation to junior public servants and has been criticised by Verona Burgess, but it can't be got at because, like the decision to go to war, the decision on outsourcing was not made by Parliament, but was made by the executive three years ago by Mr Reith and Mr Fahey. Are you satisfied with that? Because a lot of public servants are not.

Patrick Weller — Outsourcing didn't start with Reith and Fahey. You can take it back to Whitlam, if you want to, to the notion of making initially the Postal and Telecommunications Departments into government business enterprises. So I think it's bit tough to just blame this government. It's interesting though that the Public Service Act has, if anything, strengthened rather than weakened the hold of ministers over the management of the department. So there may be agency heads doing this outsourcing, but at the same time they are doing it under instruction or under government policy. I had a year in the Public Service Board once, and I'm certainly not going to defend *that* organisation as necessarily being the best one to work out whether or not people were working efficiently. It was an interesting year.

The question now is how well a government service is being delivered, since government still pays for them, on the whole. If they can be better delivered by different strategies, then so be it. I don't hold anything particularly sacred about the Commonwealth Employment Service, for instance, rather than various other workplace arrangements where some of the unemployed much prefer the current arrangement to the past one.

So what we need to ask is: what is good for the citizens? How is the service best delivered, and how are they best paid for, and how best can heads of departments manage them at the same time? Technology has changed. There is no other way that it could have been done in the 1960s given the government services that were delivered, and the government did a pretty good job in difficult circumstances. I think, since then, technology, capacity to use computers and a whole range of other things have changed so

dramatically that we don't necessarily need that sort of hierarchical delivery. So I think all governments have changed.

The interesting point is that most of the changes in management were actually driven from *inside* the Public Service, rather than from outside. Take the financial management initiatives, for example; it was not necessarily the ministers who were directing and the Public Service that were fighting—most of the time it was senior public servants looking at the ways they do things, and asking whether they could do them better.

So the complaints about too much ministerial involvement are simply not accurate. I think most of the managerial changes from 1983 onwards lie internal to the Public Service and to the managers who drove them.

Question — What are your views on the current high degree of mobility in to, out of and within the Public Service?

Patrick Weller — Actually there's a lot out of, but not much in to. What's really interesting is that people talk about mobility in and outside the Public Service. Very few have gone out and then come back in at senior levels. Mostly it's out, and then they can't afford to come back in, because in practical terms the Public Service provides—some of the time at least—quite good training. (I would exclude certain departments I know about, for different reasons.) They've got very talented people coming in, and after ten years, the banks love them—particularly from places like the Treasury. Because it saves the banks problems of training and the officers can treble their incomes when they go out. And there are not many people (though I know a few) who, having done that, are prepared to take substantial salary drops just for the entertainment of running public policy. Those department heads who run public policy, I would suspect, do it because they enjoy the challenge rather than because they enjoy the pay.

So what we have is a large number of people coming in, and a very select number coming back in again after they have spent a period in the private sector. Now on the one hand, it doesn't particularly matter if we have a more efficient private sector, on the grounds that public managers are almost certainly better, looking at the record, than many private managers—for example those at Ansett, HHH, Bond. A lot of people in the 1980s were held up as the epitome of good private sector managers, asking, 'Why isn't the public sector run like that?' Now, of course, we *know* why it wasn't run like that, and we thank God for that, because it's our money.

Nevertheless some do tend to leave the Public Service. Places like BHP's public information area have a list of names of ex-secretaries of departments, all making much larger amounts of money than they would do in their old positions.

So the Public Service is training people for the world outside, rather than the other way around. Do I think that's a good thing? I think the Public Service needs to be very careful about protecting its talent, because it is much more important that the *country* is run well than that a *company* is run well, and we need the people there with the talent, maintaining the challenge so that they are able to take the senior jobs when they become available. I suspect that is something which all public services at the moment across Australia are conscious of because of the difficulty of doing just that. So, out a lot, in seldom, and not very successfully. That's a real problem.

And within, moving people around? Yes, it used to be that people reached the position of head of the department in which they had been employed all their lives. Now I believe sufficiently in generic management to think that understanding the problem—and particularly understanding the connections—becomes more important than understanding the internal detail. There are perhaps a few exceptions, but not many. I can't imagine that even the Secretary of the Treasury would not be better off for experience outside the Treasury. That doesn't mean that secretaries of the Treasury who haven't had that outside experience aren't good, or the ones that have been outside aren't bad, but that experience across the range of government activities and understanding what governments are about seems to me ideally desirable.