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Learning to be a Minister

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We attribute, in theory at least, heroic characteristics to our ministers. As soon as they are sworn in, they need to take responsibility for the policies and actions of their departments, to answer questions, to oversee policy initiatives, even when they had no experience in the portfolio area. Administrative competence, subject omniscience, and media confidence are the traits we expect. Of course we know it is really not like that. The first months are often better described as a continuing graduate seminar, combined with a program of defusing the mines left by their predecessors. Some make it; others struggle. Few are given any slack by the media or the new opposition, whose members, initially at least, have a better detailed knowledge of the portfolio than the new ministers.

So we decided to take advantage of the new government in 2007 to ask how ministers learnt, and how the recently departed ministers looked back on their experience as ministers. We wanted to catch the Labor ministers in the first 15 months, when they could still remember what it was like to be new. There was a second intent. In 1981 Michelle Grattan and I had published a book *Can Ministers Cope?*; it was a study of the role of ministers in the 1970s. So we wanted now to ask how the position had changed, what pressures were new and what remained of the lessons that we had tried to draw from that period.

Labor had few ministers with prior experience as ministers, although many had been advisers in the Hawke Keating era and in and around state Labor governments. Learning had to be on the job. As one of them said:

there are courses for almost every occupation but there is no course that teaches you how to be a member of parliament and there's no course that teaches you how to be a minister. It's assumed that if you are elected, you can be sworn in, [and] you can be an effective minister. There is no training course and, unless you ask, no-one volunteers to help, so basically it's what you can glean from watching others and from applying what you think are commonsense principles to the sorts of things that you are called upon to do.

Here it did not matter what party the new minister came from, and whether they were part of a new or continuing government.

Some of the experiences were a rapid education in the reality of departmental silos.

I was sworn in and then came back to the office by myself and this guy in overalls was taking out the fridge. I had taken over [a Coalition minister's] old ministerial office. I said, 'Where are you going with the fridge?' He said, 'Minister, this fridge is the property of the Department of xxx and I'm taking it to the Minister for xxx's office'. I said, 'Oh, what am I meant to do for a fridge?' He said, 'Minister, I suggest you call [your department] and get one'. That was my introduction to government.

Others found that the public service looked very different from inside government.

The funniest thing was I had laid out in opposition some policies, some amendments and my predecessor would say regularly, 'Well what the shadow minister is proposing is completely unworkable; the [department's] advice is it can't be done—if it were to be done it would create all these problems which just shows that the shadow [minister] is not fit to hold office, he's completely out of touch with reality etc.' and you're sitting there thinking, 'Well I thought it was a good idea'. So I thought when I walked into that meeting, 'Well these are all the people who briefed that everything I wanted to do was completely unworkable and could not be done so this is going to be an interesting meeting'.

So I sat down and I said—well after the introductions—I said, 'I do have some proposals and ideas of where I'd like to take things', and he said, 'Yes, Minister, we kept a track of your comments and your amendments and your policies'. He pulled out this folder and said, 'Here's the implementation plan'. I thought, 'Well this beats opposition any day'. So yeah, I found [the department] very professional.

But the immediate lesson was that suddenly what ministers said mattered in a way that had not really been true in opposition. There a faux pas could be embarrassing; in government saying something out of order could be much worse.

most of [what you do] you can't talk about, particularly in a fraught environment. You do have to be very careful about every word you say. In some ways that was one of the hardest parts of the job in the first few months, just being very careful about what you said about particularly sensitive issues. It can be interpreted in a whole variety of environments. You can't just have a casual conversation necessarily with people you know because it may be repeated

The workload was immediate and unrelenting. New ministers thought they had worked hard in opposition, and they did, but with few staff and essentially then concerned about putting the case in the media.

Then they came to places like Defence

The Department has a budget of more than \$25 billion per annum; civilian staff of nearly 15 000, not including the Defence Materiel Organisation staff of 7500; and uniformed personnel of more than 55 000—76 000 if you include the reserves.

In 2008, the Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries received 8944 pieces of correspondence and asked for 1886 pieces of advice from the Department; between them, they received 3959 briefs for action and 3041 briefs for advice, 112 Cabinet briefs; and 3542 ministerial representations. Over the next year, I am expecting to take 30 submissions on major capability projects to the National Security Committee of the Cabinet.

Suddenly there was a whole phalanx of people prepared to deliver on what the minister wanted. One new minister noted the contrast.

When I was a shadow minister I used to walk in and say to the one, two or three people working for me, today we need to do one, two, three, four, five and six. And on a good day only one would be done because of a lack of resources. When I first became a minister I'd come in and I'd say, 'Ok, I want one, two, three, four, five and six' and after a day to a week someone would come back to me and say, 'Minister, we've done this', and I'd say, 'Why have you done that?' And they'd say, 'Minister, because you said so'. And I'd say, 'Well I have no independent recollection of that'. The danger of being a minister is when you say we're doing this or I want that, that people actually do it.

Departments want to be responsive to ministers. But all the time there remains agenda to pursue even where ministers may have no strong ideas of their own. The department will generate work for ministers, a whole range of activities which needs a minister's approval. Some ministers thought they needed to be careful about being run by their departments.

The department will have their own interests and their own agendas and they'll want to sign you up to a whole lot of stuff as well. So you could very easily as a minister become totally submerged effectively in important-seeming but ultimately insignificant activity which keeps you busy, keeps a whole lot of other people busy, but doesn't in the end make any great difference to the world. And I hate that. I accept that a certain amount of it is unavoidable because there are, if you like, the ceremonial duties of being minister.

In 1981 we published *Can Ministers cope?* in the same month that *Yes Minister* began its run on the ABC; to the disadvantage of the book as commentators said the show was much more fun. They were right of course. Who could compete with that brilliance? The show kept everyone laughing but had a political effect as it sometimes created an air of suspicion (in countries as far from Britain as Namibia!). It imbued all public service actions with the taint of Sir Humphrey. As one experienced minister noted:

Some of the ministers under Howard and some of the ministers, I suspect, under Rudd regard their department –or their staff regard the department—as the enemy and that's a massive waste of resources. And of course there is this paranoia: 'I can't be seen as a captive of my department'. Well, you should never be a captive of the department, you should never be a cipher of their view, but to regard them with total mistrust is equally as bad.

The best experiences are where the two managed to combine. There is a story told of Keating when there was a need to fix the budget:

He understood intuitively that it had to be done and he said, 'I have to convince Caucus, so give me a brief on that', and I did. He sent it back and said, 'This is not believable; this is what I don't like about it'. So I did it again. He sent it back again. I did it for a third time and he called me to his office and said, 'Good, you have got it. This is what we wanted'. He invited me to go with him to the Caucus which I did. When we got there I discovered he was speaking from hand written notes. After my three pieces he had written his own from it and I just sat there and marvelled at this presentation.

Parliament loomed far larger than most observers would credit. Despite all the comments about the decline of parliament, it remains a significant, even slightly scary, place in the ministers' world. Two opinions emphasise how central it can be.

When the parliament sits, parliament is our focus. It's the executive reporting to the parliament. So we do that and, depending on what issues are running, you can get some work done, you can't get some work done. But I work on the basis that generally on a parliamentary week, if you survive Question Time you've done well. If you've got anything else done, it's a bonus.

A coalition minister agreed:

It takes you a good six months before you feel comfortable. You're terrified when you go into Question Time because you just don't know the issues, but you're more and more on top of issues so over time you do become more confident.

[In opposition] I used to take reading material with me into Question Time if I knew I wasn't going to be asking a question. It was a good chance to read letters or policy documents. I wouldn't dream of doing that now, because you never know ...

Given the adversarialism of party politics, the scrutiny and the expectations, it is perhaps not surprising that a Howard minister too reported:

Parliamentary days as a minister are quite stressful. Even if nothing ostensibly happens, they are quite stressful. You are always on tenterhooks. In fact, I would always be working very hard after Question Time, but I would be much more relaxed because normally no crises ever happen after Question Time

Secretaries too had a learning curve. They are often unsure whom they will be serving. One secretary expected the shadow spokesman who had been briefed in the caretaker government to be confirmed as minister. The secretary got a call from a chief of staff he has never heard of. 'Can you come and see the minister?' 'Which minister?' 'Oh! hadn't you heard'? So he went straight across to parliament house, had a three-hour chat with the incoming minister in which he covered the few election promises, and range of platform commitments. The intention was to establish initial working relations. He also took with him a lease signed that needed to be signed because there are some things only a minister can do.

A number of secretaries identified in different ways the traits of the best ministers they served:

- Openness—intellectual openness, honesty, an understanding of the boundaries between the department and the office ... I think it is a sense of intellectual and personal integrity.

- Better judgement in what matters and what doesn't; [an] understanding of how the machinery of government works is a good one. A good sense of what departments can and can't do, what they should and shouldn't do, how to get the best out of department, how to get the best out of the staff, how to make decisions, and what decisions matter and what decisions don't. Government is a bit like Paul Keating's wrestling with a coil of smoke.
- Ideal minister: hardworking, respectful of roles, prepared to engage formally and informally with their department, who is a good politician in the sense that they can influence and work with others, a person with principles and high ethical standards, in terms of what is appropriate to do and not to do. Demanding, which is exactly what you want and expect in a senior minister, but reasonable at the same time. He brings consideration to policy issues in a very structured way: objectives, principles, evidence research and analysis.
- Good ministers have a framework, trust senior people, good judgement, decide quickly keep paper flow, don't go to minutiae.
- Best are the ministers who keep their mind up here, focused on policy, know how to work with their colleagues, know how to work with the department, know how to get the legislation happening, know how to work with industry and stakeholders and know how to make it happen. You get the top fifteen federally that are by and large seriously good. You get a top five in states.

- A good intellectual understanding of what they are about. The very best ministers have been intellectually very able. They usually [have] a clear vision about what the government's objectives are in the broadest sense and also for their sector and have the capacity to decide what is their business and what is the secretary's business.

Those ideas set a high bar. Then there is a litany of faults, the ministers from hell that they do not need:

- The worst ones are those who think they are going to micro-manage and deal in details of which they've got no idea about, or start managing [areas in] which they've got no competence.
- Some try to become the chief operating officer. They tend to try and micro-manage stuff and they become very risk averse and indecisive. That is my experience. They won't make decisions and they go through things umpteen times and it drives you crazy.
- I think the hardest ones to work with are those who aren't really committed to their government's agenda and who feel politically exposed about making any difficult decisions. They are too scared to make a decision ... [One program] started off as a good program but by the time it went through policy process

What has changed in the thirty years since Michelle and I wrote *Can Ministers Cope?*; in short technology, speed, media coverage and, both cause and effect, a massive increase in ministerial staff. Lindsay Tanner has argued the speed and continuity of the media coverage has cheapened political coverage, and the often self congratulatory declarations of innocence from some journalists suggests he has a point. Let me cite a minister talking long before that book.

The speed of the media and the nature of where the media has gone has created a whole new level of pressure. I'm actually making a democracy point here—they decide whether we will crumble or not. But the diminution of the amount of time devoted in a news discussion to politics and the move to infotainment means that necessarily impacts therefore on how our politicians think and behave. I actually think there are real issues for our democracy with the way in which we seek to distil things so often to such simple and such simplistic concepts. And that's not a 'they should be smarter' [comment]; it's actually a comment about political dialogue with the nation ... The problem is there are always difficult problems and if we keep constructing our national political dialogue around simple solutions, which is

Another minister thoughtfully identified one regrettable, but undoubtedly true, consequence.

The least helpful part of the job is the inability to show uncertainty or consideration.

The fact that none of the decision-making process is public is because the idea that

decisions aren't born fully formed like Venus means that there is uncertainty. If there is uncertainty, there is doubt and if there is doubt there is the potential for failure ... so it goes on. That's a shame because most big decisions are made on balance. 'This might be the right way to go or that might be the right way to go; with all the information I've got I think on balance I'll go with this one.' But the way we are expected to present in public and in the media, is this is the only possible answer ... I understand why, as an institution, parliament and the ministry have developed that way ... I think in a more mature democracy would take people into its confidence more. I don't think the media culture enables that ... I think it would be absolutely irresistible for journalists to make more of that than what there is.

Since the media space or time has to be filled every day, not to respond to the media leaves that space to the opposition and encourages criticism. It is no longer possible, ministers argue, just not to comment. Nor is it viable to have ministers providing different responses, in which case the difference, not the response, becomes the story. So coordination of responses to provide a consistent policy story becomes spin, while a lack of coordination denotes an uncertain government. Ministers feel they cannot win, but they will always try. They are accused of being obsessed by the media.

The speed of technology of course means that they are effectively on call all the time, whether they are in the country or not. In 1981 there was no internet, no mobile phones, no email, and no twitter. If the prime minister wanted to contact a minister, officials had to guess where they might be found and it could be hours or longer before they were found. Now it is immediate. Technology makes managing easier in many respects, but the political day never ends. Are we really better governed now, or just more frenetically?

Ministerial staff now provide a buffer between the ministers and the world outside to whatever degree they choose. The geography of the New Parliament House collects the

ministers in their own wing, away from the House of Representatives and Senate colleagues. They can be more isolated than they were in the old building.

So staff are needed to provide personal support, to assist in the management of the political agenda, to cope with communication and, by no means least, to maintain the network across ministerial offices. In a circumstance where isolation within the cocoon potentially created by the pressures of departmental business, the staff can ensure that links are made across departments.

The growth in numbers of staff also ensures that, for departments, advice is contested. If in the 1970s the departmental secretary was the key adviser, that can no longer be taken for granted. Staff are there from early morning to late in the evening, always in the office next door and ready to assist the minister. It is not surprising that some officials find them intrusive. For others they are but part of the new game. Working with staff can often solve problems without having to involve the ministers directly.

A senior chief of staff with extensive prior experience in opposition reported:

It's a different job [being in government] and you do have to work very closely with the department to make it work. It doesn't come naturally to some people. You have to have a very thorough and a mature professional relationship with the department. You have to be very clear about expectations. You have to be very clear about roles and you have to talk to them all the time. Sometimes you agree, sometimes you don't, and that's how it's got to be.

A departmental secretary expressed a similar view:

The best [ministerial staffers] really do understand, perhaps even instinctively, just how useful the department can be to a minister and they seek to ensure that the department is working effectively. They seek that as an outcome for themselves. So

that doesn't sound particularly exceptional, but let me talk about the contrast of a ministerial staffer who seeks to subvert or go around, or undermine in some way the departmental view. I can recall occasions in the past, going back a way now, when people in the ministerial office have taken exception to [the department's] position on something and instead of using [the department], sought to undermine its role in the provision of advice to the minister. Ultimately this is dysfunctional. Both the department and the adviser lose out and, of course, then the minister also loses. So the good ones, they understand how to make the department work effectively for the minister.

Another departmental secretary remarked that ministerial staff:

apply a different filter or lens than we do and I think that's entirely appropriate. We're not ignorant of political considerations, nor should we be, but we don't apply the same political lens to issues that a minister's office can for a minister. We work hard to make sure that we work effectively with ministers' offices and with advisers and we've generally, I think, been blessed that we don't have advisers who think they're the minister. I suspect that problems arise where the advisers forget the nature of their role and try to be something else: to decide matters, to make judgements, to berate people. I've heard examples of all those sorts of things occurring, but we don't experience that. We work hard to make sure we don't experience things, but we work for ministers. We advise ministers.

Within the offices chiefs of staff have become important because, as the offices have grown, so has the need for management. As one of them said:

I always describe it [the chief of staff job] as three things. You're the principal adviser. You essentially opt into the important issues and the things you feel strongly

about. You can't opt into everything because you're only human. Second, you manage the team: a lot of advisers, a lot of staff and a lot of priorities and ensure she [the minister] is doing the important stuff. Stakeholder relations are a third major function. There's a group of people that you just have to have the relationship with, so I spend a bit of time with those sorts of groups.

The ministers' offices now look very different. The role has changed for staff and for public servants. Of course all that additional assistance may be needed merely to keep up with the existing pressures and speed of political life today. From the cluttered rabbit warrens of the old parliament house to the wide corridors and quietness of the ministerial wing, with its capacious suites, is all very different in atmosphere. But life is no simpler within.

Do we ask too much of our ministers? I don't propose to be sympathetic. They want the job, compete for the job and fight desperately to hold on to the job. Some are not up to it, even if they are competent in other areas. But is it too much for one person? Absolutely not, if they know what they are doing and focus their efforts. Listen to one person on Enough Rope with a far harder political job than any Australian can ever hold.

Andrew Denton: Is the job too much for one man?

BILL CLINTON: No. And you could do it, you know? I worked at it harder and longer hours than a lot of people do ... I made a decision to work in the way I did, and the way I always had. I'd always been almost a workaholic. But the presidency in the end is a deciding job. You pay a president to make choices that you, the voter, can't make on your own. So, while it's important ... to work like crazy, it's also important not to become so exhausted that your judgment is impaired. And that was a constant balancing act. I wanted to be working right up

to the end, but I didn't want to have impaired judgement.<sup>1</sup>

But ministers come in different forms. There are many ways of being effective; not all ministers, perhaps fortunately. Follow the same path. We suggest a set of suitably Australian categories:

- the maintenance ministers
- the spruiker ministers
- the policy driver ministers
- the warrior ministers
- the partisan ministers.

We do not suggest that ministers fit neatly in one category. Rather that they categories provide stereotypical examples of the style of some ministers some of the time. I am sure people will have fun trying to classify the ministers they know, but we do not try to go that far.

*Maintenance ministers* are those who have few ideas and few initiatives they want to follow. They rely on the department to come up with solutions to the problems that emerge and will have few ambitions but survival. For public servants, contrary to legend, such a 'captive' minister may be a nightmare because nothing happens. Progress requires ministerial input and a capacity to persuade colleagues in Cabinet. Ministers who passively accept what they are given are often unable to defend their position because they do not have the clout or the political nous. Nothing will happen on their watch. When they bring items to cabinet, it will be the time that other hard heads decide it is time for 'a bit of sport'.

The *spruiker* is the minister who has no ideas or policy initiatives but can run energetically with the suggestions from the department. Almost all ministers will be spruikers at times;

they cannot initiate everything and the departmental range will be far beyond their individual capacity to direct everything. A few never go further. Their political skill is to present themselves as full of ideas when they sell their new policies to Cabinet or the parliament. Of course their success depends on the ability of the officials to develop ideas that they can then espouse with vigour. Some departments are better at protecting their minister than others. Others may leave them occasionally in the lurch. These ministers need help and if relations with departments sour, they struggle to combine their high profile with a lack of content.

The *policy driver* ministers are those who seek to shape the agenda. They know that all the ideas do not come from them. They know they can depend on officials to develop detail on any issues that arrive. At the end of the term they want to be able to list a number of issues where they were able to make their mark by taking crucial decisions and then selling them to Cabinet. There may be a number of crises where their perspective determined the outcome. There are also likely to be number of issues where they wanted to achieve change but failed to do so. It might be they did not have the time to focus, or they could not find an official who would drive the proposal while they were involved in other matters. Most ministers will have their regrets. These ministers may be the quiet achievers who receive little public attention; indeed they prefer to work out of the spotlight and let others take the heat and the glory. For them, and for their officials, it is a collaborative exercise.

The *warriors* are those ministers who love a fight, who will pick issues that they know will gain attention and virulent opposition. The battle is the thing, a contest over values and political turf. Such ministers argue that there is no point being there unless they try to make big changes, and those big changes are bound to generate opposition and bring losers. There are always some warriors among senior ministers, Abbott and Reith, Gillard and Albanese, who enjoy the fight AND want to make substantial policy changes in volatile areas of

government. Treasurers and of course prime ministers usually fit the role by choice and position. People don't get there without being prepared to put themselves on the line.

The *partisans* are those ministers who have little interest in their portfolio but are there to provide partisan advice about political advantage. All ministers are partisan, all ministers are political; that is the job. A few are no more than this, and they may be given light portfolio responsibilities while they are the 'minister for politics'. That was truer before the 1987 changes when there were more Cabinet ministers between whom responsibilities could be divided. With the decrease in senior Cabinet numbers, they will often combine the hard politics with policy requirements.

What lessons can we draw from an analysis of ministers?

First, the system of government may have become more centralised, but it remains a Westminster system. As a departmental secretary declared:

It's as far from the US system as it's ever been. Don't let people tell you it drifted into a 'Washminster' system; it's Westminster with Australian characteristics. It's different from Canada, different from the UK, different from New Zealand. It's ours and it's determined by parliament house, by all those different parties.

Prime ministers may have greater technological capacity to direct, but ministers remain key players without whom the system will not work. Australia is not a presidential system.

Ministers matter.

Second, expectations are often heroic. Citizens expect ministers to fix everything. They want increased spending (on themselves) and lower taxes. If they get into trouble through tempest or intemperance in the suburbs or overseas, they expect ministers to solve them. They expect immediate answers to their complaints. Alexander Downer said after he left office what he admitted he could not say in office. When Australian citizens ignored Foreign Affairs advice

and went to the Lebanon, then demanded the Australian government rescue them when war broke out and complained that the response was too slow, they acted unreasonably. Those sorts of expectations of government are still not unusual. Some citizens expect to be consulted at length and at the same time to have rapid government responses to solve their problems. Government, to misquote President Reagan, is both the problem and the solution. Ministers are their personification, at once the source of relief and the epitome of grubby self-interest.

Third, the critics often exaggerate the capacity of governments, encouraged perhaps by the sometimes inflated claims for credit by ministers when things go well. There are many areas where government influence is minimal, or at best slow to change the environment. Patience with governments is not an Australian characteristic in these cases.

Fourth, in government ministers appreciate the constraints, both on them as individuals and on governments. Therefore we need to avoid oversimplified models of what ministers actually do. As a British writer commented in the 1970s, there is a:

... need to get away from ministerial narcissism in which the attempt is made to maintain the myth that they are the instigators of all new policies. It is this myth that contributes most of their overwork and makes it difficult for them to do the key parts of their job well.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, we still hear from former ministers how 'I' introduced new schemes that changed the shape of society. That is narcissism writ large. They do not make policy on their own. They work with ideas and proposals that come from a variety of sources. But eventually, whether or not they started the proposal, it needs their signature, to go to Cabinet, to finalise a project, even to delegate responsibility. The ability to decide makes them an essential part of

the process. What ministers must do is to ensure they contribute where they can and understand those issues when their decision is essential. What makes them unique is not a separation of powers and activities but the right to decide.

Fifth, there are still some things only ministers can do. Only ministers can present a proposal to Cabinet. Only ministers can introduce legislation in parliament and answer questions on their portfolio. These are areas where ministers must perform because in the system of government they are essential. In that sense they will add value to the work that others do. So the best ministers are shrewd, hard working, intelligent and demanding. They have commonsense and good judgment. They must work through routines, through many small decisions and discussions. Routine makes the chaotic manageable. It breaks the impossible dilemmas into intelligible units for decision. It tames the excessive demands into a timetable that, although inevitably hectic, can best allow ministers and their advisers to set priorities and make decisions. The priorities, whether political, procedural or administrative, may not be those that any outside observer would accept, and they will differ from minister to minister. They are, nevertheless, the choices that all ministers in charge of their own time and direction must make. Effective ministers have to decide in what areas they want to put their time, how it will be rationed, where they will trust others and where they will insist. They have many working for them, all with views. In the end the ministers must add their own value.

Not all can do it. The expectations of ministers are heroic, the routines to achieve it mundane. There is no one way to be an effective minister

Running government is a relentless business and you could wake up every morning and let it run you and not achieve what you set out to do or you can wake up every

morning and say, 'I'm going to run it. I got into this business to achieve the following things and I'm going to crash through and I'm going to push and I'm going to achieve them.' Lots of things about our system—the shortness of the news cycle, some of the cynicism about politics, the bigness of the bureaucracy, lots of things conspire to defeat that. You've just got to have the wherewithal each and every day to say, 'No, I'm running it, it's not running me.'

It's a great aspiration that some ministers manage to achieve some of the time. It is too much to expect they all will.