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The Commish



The importance of openness and transparency

You may have seen some media coverage of the Inspector-General of Taxation's Annual Report this week.

The report contained some criticism of the Tax Office.

We anticipated this criticism – I was given a draft copy of the report's overview to comment on, and I wrote a letter in response.

I said that we are one of the most frequently reviewed Commonwealth agencies, and that we enjoy positive working relationships with

many scrutineers. This is so despite the fact we don't always see eye to eye.

I went on to point out some specific issues with the report's overview.

One of the allegations levelled at us is that we are not always transparent in our dealings with the Inspector-General's Office. As you know, openness and

transparency are values I'd like our organisation to further develop.

To this end, I have asked Policy Management Division (PMD) and ATO Relations to look specifically at the processes we use when liaising with the Inspector-General's Office. This is so that we can demonstrate our integrity around response times and other indicators of transparency, whatever be the behaviour of others. We will continue to work with the Commonwealth Ombudsman, the Auditor-General, the Privacy Commissioner, Parliamentary committees, the Inspector-General and others to identify ways to improve tax administration.

The drought is hitting hard

We all know that drought is affecting many Australians. Tax officers should be sensitive to the special circumstances of people affected by drought, as we are to all people caught up in natural disasters.

People in these circumstances may be finding it difficult to meet their tax obligations, and we should provide assistance rather than taking on a firm enforcer role.

Tax officers who might potentially be dealing with people in drought-affected areas will soon receive some guidelines, similar to those issued in the wake of Cyclone Larry. In the interim, please keep an eye out for those who might be affected by the drought and if you're not sure how to deal with people in these situations, check with your manager.

Working with Treasury

I attended the Treasury Revenue Group planning day on Friday, and spoke to them about the advantages of integrated tax design.

We work in partnership with Treasury to provide high-quality advice to government on taxation system issues.

We both want high-quality tax laws that can be administered to give effect to the policy intent, and that the community can comply with as simply as possible.

Integrated tax design can help us both reach these objectives. Effective consultation and dialogue; flexible and collaborative and user-centred processes; and iterative evaluation and review are fundamental for the development and implementation of good design.

In a disciplined process with defined checkpoints, these features allow implementers of tax measures to optimise the alignment between policy legislation and user needs. I encouraged Treasury to take the leadership in championing the further development of an integrated tax design framework.

I concluded by acknowledging the good working relationship we already have, and said I'd like us to continue to strengthen that relationship and to embed the approach of integrated tax design. We should leverage off each other's expertise and knowledge for the ultimate benefit of the community. My complete message to the group will be published on the PMD intranet site soon.

White Ribbon Day

November 25 is White Ribbon Day, the international day for the elimination of violence against women. I'm proud to be an ambassador for the second year running.

White Ribbon Day was created by a handful of Canadian men in 1991 on the second anniversary of one man's massacre of 14 women in Montreal. They began the White Ribbon Campaign to urge men to speak out against violence against women. It's grown to an international force, with almost 250,000 ribbons distributed in Australia last year.

As an ambassador, I urge tax officers to get involved. If you'd like to volunteer to sell ribbons in your site, please contact Kristy Dam on (02) 621 62744.

New integrity advisor

I am pleased to announce that, from Monday, 6 November, Robin Creyke will be our new Integrity Advisor.

Robin is a highly regarded expert in administrative law at the Australian National University (ANU), holds a range of positions in senior management at the ANU and is a part-time member of the Administrative Review Council. She has also recently acted as Special Counsel for Phillips Fox Lawyers, working with a number of public sector agencies.

I have asked her to ensure that our processes provide procedural fairness for taxpayers and our staff; that we evaluate complaints and suggestions, addressing any systemic issues; and that, from a taxpayer advocate's perspective, we live our values.

I would like to thank Peter Kennedy for his contributions in his five years as Integrity Advisor. He has promoted and reinforced an ethically-based organisational culture in the Tax Office during the last five years: the Tax Office is at the forefront of the APS in embedding integrity into our governance processes. Peter has consistently provided valuable advice to myself and my senior colleagues on a range of governance and integrity issues.

Peter felt that it was important for the Tax Office to have a 'fresh set of eyes' in the position and I am pleased that he will continue his role on our Audit Committee as an independent member. He will also stay on for a while to assist Robin.

Congratulations to Robin, and farewell to Peter.

Deputy Commissioner for Client Contact

I am also pleased to announce that Jane King has been selected for the position of Deputy Commissioner, Client Contact.

Jane is currently the Assistant Deputy General, Smart Service Queensland and has been responsible for the development and implementation of the Queensland government's 'whole of government service strategy' across all Queensland government generic services.

Service management and service improvements have been a key career focus for Jane.

Initially beginning her career as a teacher in Queensland, Jane has also worked for Telecom Australia as Regional Sales Manager for

Queensland country region, and has also held a range of roles in State Government and with the Brisbane City Council.

Jane will commence work with the Tax Office on 15 January 2007.

Michael McDermott, who has been managing the Client Contact Business Line since its creation in May last year, will move to Serious Non Compliance as Assistant Commissioner, Program Management Office, commencing 30 October, 2006. Michael will oversee the project management of Project Wickenby, including the whole of government aspects of the project. He will also be responsible for the SNC line's business support area.

I would like to thank Michael for the work he has done in leading the Client Contact Management Capability and transitioning it to the Client Contact Business Line.

In the short time the business line has been formed, a significant amount of work has been done to position the line and staff for the future and to make the shifts that were envisioned at the time the four line capabilities were brought together.

Stewart Smille, Assistant Commissioner, Income Tax, will act as Deputy Commissioner, Client Contact, until Jane King commences in January 2007. ★

Michael McDermott