Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the APS Review. Having worked in a number of Federal departments over the past 20 years (PM&C, Education & Science, Industry), I have been part of, and witnessed much change in the APS - in technology and the way we work, the shift of Executives and SES onto performance contracts, the 24hr news cycle and the pervasive nature of mobile phones and email, with APS leaders, managers and staff needing to be available beyond core hours. More critically though, there have been important changes in the political environment, including the rise of Ministerial advisers and the increasing combative nature of public discourse. It is politics, of course, which dominates what we do, how and why, and why work is often a big reactive and rushed churn, at the unfortunate expense of sound evidence-based policy for the longer-term and in the wider public interest. It can be at times, a race to the bottom and as members of the APS, we need to own and acknowledge this - with government, because we design or contribute to the advice. However, the multi-dimensional, complex nature of issues and the need to balance how best we grow the economy, ensure higher standards of living for Australians & sustainability of where we live and how we bring a more humane and civil approach to debate and policy advice, all demand that we need to reform. This starts with clarity of mission – who we serve and therefore the role that we need to, or can best play.

The APS perhaps then is at a threshold moment - do we serve the Government of the day and/or the public? If there is tension, what should win out – good policy or smart politics? In particular:

* Do we strive for greater capability & connectedness to be policy heavyweights for providing apolitical advice?
* Or do we instead fully focus on marketing, communications and service delivery to the public for the government of the day, and for Ministers and their advisers (who need to be on the constant look-out for announceables, good news stories, defensive lines and who are sensitive to the special interests across the community).

I think it is hard to do all this properly and with quality and impact – there is inherent conflict built into our work environment, and the above roles require very different skills sets and are difficult to juggle. As APS officers, we are asked to both promote and defend the government of the day – whether good or bad policy – as well as be creative policy designers, problem-solvers, and (increasingly) story-tellers and to get this done in quick-time (please). This is borne out with examples of some of the major ongoing policy agendas, which are problematic and entrenched; e.g.:

* Stalled wages growth (strangling the economy);
* Industry and innovation policy (stuck on rhetoric, not funded adequately and no-one can explain innovation policy to the public in a meaningful way);
* Energy policies (coal is still prominent);
* Regional development funding (selective on the one hand for some regions, with no logic for why those regions, and funding thousands of small local projects on the other & little evidence for impact for any of the $billions poured in);
* Policies on those seeking refuge (unethical & inhumane); and
* Indigenous policies (failure since colonisation).

Some views & suggestions

* Sound apolitical policy advice needs APS leaders and officers who pursue evidence (beyond the rhetoric) and follow it to insights, ask Government for the time to drill down to understand and build up complex policy solutions, value conversing and listening to people on the ground, and use ethical frames for policy advice.
* APS leaders and officers should value and allow a range of disciplines to contribute to policy-making, in addition to economics. True insights often come from the intersection of disciplines, not just one way of thinking.
* Executives need to be allowed to stand up to Ministers/advisers more for good policy, not the quick political results. Secretaries should be accountable to the Parliament and appointed by an independent panel (with rotating trusted/expert community, corporate and other institutional leaders).
* The business of the Parliament should be streamlined and made much more purposeful – much is archaic and time-wasting.
* Ministerial staff should be augmented so APS officers no longer have to write QTBs, media releases, correspondence replies, event briefs, good news stories, defensive lines – these are all political tasks and do not belong in the APS policy work domain.
* There are too many SES and Executive layers in departments. EL2s carry a weight of managing staff, budgets, thinking strategically but daily problem-solving, responding to briefing, correspondence and information requests, & dealing with stakeholders. We are told we are the captains and the coaches – perhaps it is time to re-look at the SES Band 1 and 2 levels and what they do and contribute. Are Deputy Secretaries necessary?
* Some departments have created ‘strategic policy divisions’ which can be a misnomer. Often such divisions create process, ‘death by coordination’ and policy oversight and it can lead to overlapping or unproductive work.
* The central agencies need to be seriously looked at - a key reform should be to wind back their roles and responsibilities to more identifiable and productive core business. I acknowledge that our central agency colleagues are hard-working, of course are professional and individually, personable and helpful – they believe in what they do and I respect that. However, from the experience of a great number of us in line agencies, we find that central agency colleagues act more like the submarine captains who tell their juniors to ‘restore propulsion’, without being able to contribute to the collective exercise across the Commonwealth to problem-solve, innovate and add value.
* We are stymied by Budget processes, which rely on individual Ministers to find offsets (or fighting to protect their sources of funds). There is no room for innovative funding mechanisms to support proper cross-portfolio policies & initiatives. Finance, in particular, must be more innovative and learn to give advice beyond ‘no’. Between departments, there is still too much ‘patch protection’.
* In departments, the shift to open-plan offices has been unhelpful for quiet/deep thinking and studies are now showing how they lead to less communication, collaboration and a decrease in productivity. In general, people don’t like being packed in like sardines in the workplace. The APS is lagging behind the corporate world in this regard.
* Across the APS/in departments, there is too much ‘busy’, process-based work and coordination of requests for information. There is a large demand for written briefing, even in departments for Executives and SES – people need to learn the art of verbal briefing, giving and receiving, and the art of conversation. Much work lacks an overarching strategy, purpose and impact and is reactive. This must change and change must come from the top down.

Thank you.