**SUBMISSION TO THE APS REVIEW 2018**

I write as a former Australian Public Servant, working from 1983 to 2000, and then from 2006 till 2015. I worked at the EL2 level from 1991 onwards in various government departments and agencies.

I have some comments in relation to the APS Review, which I hope will be thorough and not simply a way to reduce the public service and outsource the work to private enterprise.

**Corporate memory**

I believe this to be a vital part of public service work, and something that has been lost, due to high levels of redundancies and high turnover of positions, particularly at the SES level. Having an understanding of how things have been done, what things have been tried, what worked and what failed is important as it prevents reinventing the wheel, minimises costs and is ultimately a more productive use of public servants’ time.

I have seen this at play, particularly in my last years within the APS. It was an appalling waste of resources and new SES staff, especially those brought in from outside, having no concept of how the public service operates and what is expected of public servants.

**SES**

Having seen the huge spike in numbers of SES staff over the years, I have not seen this to be a positive thing. As more and more SES1 staff were appointed, the work was split into smaller and smaller bits, with few having a view of the bigger picture and thus not being able to work cooperatively with others because they didn’t even know what others did, and doing work which was often duplicated.

In addition, the newer SES1 staff were doing the work that would previously have been done by EL2 and EL1 staff, effectively deskilling these staff and giving them less work, as SES1 staff sat in offices doing administrative work rather than concentrating on the big picture.

Additionally, I noticed that these SES staff had high turnovers, as they were only interested in their careers rather than familiarising themselves with specific work and never fully understanding their subject matter, which does not create good outcomes and does not lead to a more ‘agile’ workforce.

**Career public service**

This point relates to the point above. Once upon a time, public servants saw a career in front of them and were proud to be part of an important workforce, where they could learn new skills, specialise in particular work areas or become subject matter experts, eventually working their way up the ladder if they wished or were capable.

The public service changed, I think around 2006-2007 when more SES positions were created and when Departmental secretaries were appointed by Ministers and contracted to undertake work for Ministers. Once Secretaries were contracted to Ministers and were able to be sacked or moved, this changed the relationship between Departments and Ministers. It then meant that Secretaries and SES staff were less likely to provide independent advice or challenge Ministerial assumptions, views and policies.

This should be their role as public servants, not ‘yes men’ to Ministers and Ministerial staff. That is, because of their deep understanding of the issues and subject matter, they should be providing the best research, advice and commentary to any governments, impartially. However, I don’t believe this now happens.

Personally I have seen and listened to SES staff advising public servants that no decisions or positions can be put until they understand the Minister’s views. This is absurd. Trained and good public servant should understand their role as independent advisers rather than simply followers of orders. Of course, the ultimate decisions are up to the government of the day, but governments need to be challenged when making arbitrary or poor policy decisions, so that they receive the best possible advice.

**Outsiders at management levels**

I have noted the changing workforce within the APS where more and more people from the private sector are brought in at management levels, supposedly because they are more ‘efficient’ or ‘agile’ or will challenge the status quo. I have rarely seen this done successfully, as these managers tend to have the highest turnovers, simply because they have no understanding of how government works. This is where the career public servant is most needed. Bringing in outsiders is a false economy and changes little, except in a negative way, as very good staff move on through sheer frustration at their incompetence.

**Ageism**

From my own experience and from observation, I note that there is a significant degree of ageism creeping into the APS as younger and younger managers are appointed. Youth can be a wonderful thing, but experience is more important in the public sector as many mistakes can be avoided.

Many highly experienced and excellent staff are forced from the public service through redundancies and resignations as their skills and experience are devalued and they become marginalised. Not everyone wants to be in the SES, nor is capable, but there are many lower level excellent staff with many years service whose experience is overlooked. This is an appalling waste of valuable resources.

**Outposted staff (from Canberra)**

For many reasons, people wish to leave Canberra and return to their home States or move to other States to live, but it becomes difficult as there is not enough flexibility for staff to work in an outposted way from other locations.

In a modern technological world, this should be simple and would result in less loss of staff from the APS if it were offered more flexibly, and not offered just to SES staff or those who are ‘favoured’.

**Changing Departments/Merging**

I have seen Departments merge or come apart so often that it is just a circle, ending up at the beginning and going nowhere, creating nothing meaningful, and costing taxpayers millions of dollars. Create realistic and meaningful department or agencies that are not too big, and keep them that way.

**Customer service**

All the evidence points to this being one of the most disliked things about the public service nowadays. Governments and the public servants of that government are there for a purpose, and that is to serve the public. And that means providing more, not less staff to do this job as our population grows and technology changes. Staff levels need to be increased on the ground. The public service should never be seen as a ‘cost’ but as a vital part of providing a community service for everyone.

**Summary**

I was a proud public servant for many years, who enjoyed my work immensely, but watching the changes over the years, made me dislike it intensely and not be proud to call myself a public servant. I see many good people like this, and have seen too many good people leave. I have not seen any positive changes for many years.

Once upon a time, the public service was at the forefront of policy and social changes, including equal employment opportunities, recognition of Indigenous peoples, no smoking at work , anti-harrassment policies and many more. Sadly, I no longer see any innovative policies coming from the public service, but simply see workers who are unhappy in their jobs, who dislike management, and higher level staff who see themselves simply as servants of the government. Public servants should be impartial, loyal, innovative, bold and prepared to provide the best advice to governments as possible.

I hope to see this again one day. As to how to get there, well I hope the Review is going to make bold and innovative recommendations to restore the public’s faith in the public service and provide a better and more productive workplace for public servants who care.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission.

31 July 2018