

## COMMENTARY

### The Rise and Fall of the Career Public Service

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*It is easy to criticise the traditional model of public service employment. However its distinctiveness met the particular needs of a political environment and Westminster conventions. It was a bureaucratic model of employment aligned to the bureaucratic form of public administration, based on strong conventions of merit, tenure, political neutrality and a unified service, administered by an independent central authority. This model endured for more than a century. As public administration was transformed into public sector management, public sector employment was varied in pursuit of efficiency and responsiveness, and became an unstable mixture of traditional and new practices. Institutional changes have brought accompanying problems of duplication, lack of strategic direction or monitoring, and decreasing independence from political influences. The current public sector is beset with recruitment difficulties, high turnover in some fields, increasing use of insecure forms of employment, an ageing workforce, and lower morale than many private sector counterparts.*

#### Introduction

Few people would describe public services as excellent. They are more often seen as inefficient and ineffective by politicians, by the media and by the public. Public servants employment conditions are also criticised for not being more like that of the private sector.

This paper firstly reviews where the concept of a career public service come from, and why. It then reviews how this is changing, and in what circumstances. My argument is that there is a rationale for the distinctiveness of public sector employment which is in recognition of the particular needs of a highly political environment and Westminster conventions. It was a bureaucratic model of employment aligned to the bureaucratic form of public administration, based on strong conventions of merit, tenure, political neutrality and a unified service, administered by an independent central authority. This

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model endured for more than a century. As public administration was transformed into public sector management through importing of private sector techniques, so too public sector employment was varied in greater pursuit of efficiency flexibility and responsiveness. Public sector employment relations is now an unstable mixture of traditional and new practices. Despite the managerial emphasis on performance, there has been little assessment of the impact of these reforms on public sector employment.

## **A period of chaos**

Prior to the 1850s was a period of administrative chaos, when public services were characterised by bribery, corruption, and patronage. Under a patronage system, appointments were the gift of the head of a department, and positions were filled as a reward for services rendered or to meet some personal or political obligation rather than on the basis of competence (Gladden, 1954). This largely led to the appointment of mediocre time-servers, some of whom could not even read or write, and some who did not even consider that they needed to turn up. Departments operated separately from each other, with no common workforce or working conditions (Cohen, 1965).

Australia had similar problems to Britain of bribery, corruption and general inefficiency. The US also had a spoils or "rotation in office" system, where each incoming government could simply remove existing public servants and replace them with their own friends and supporters (Cayer, 1975: 18-21).

## **Rise of the career service**

### ***1850s the British Civil Service model***

This chaos led to a crisis. In the 1850s, civil service reform was distilled out of a larger movement of administrative reform. The 1854 Northcote Trevelyan *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service* noted that the increasingly complex nature of government and the notorious incidents of mal-administration demonstrated that government "could not be carried on without the aid of an efficient body of permanent officers, occupying a position duly subordinate to that of the Ministers, who are directly responsible to the Crown and to Parliament, yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability, and experience to be able to advise, assist, and to some extent, influence, those who are from time to time set over them". Public services were reformed toward a Weberian bureaucratic model, and this was supported by a bureaucratic model of employment.

The career service model was relatively simple – recruit young "men" according to their capacity and education; train them for a long official life; and make them feel that promotion depended on ability and hard work. Recruitment and personnel decisions were to be made by an independent central agency, which was free from political

obligations. Recruitment was through merit-based examination, open to everyone, and designed to gain candidates of general ability. An effective system of probation would provide a further check on ability. The model would encourage hard work through rewards – annual increments as a reward for satisfactory service, and promotion as a reward for comparative merit when you reached the top of your class. Northcote and Trevelyan specifically noted that seniority was evil and ineffective. A uniform classification system across the service would overcome fragmentation, allowing people to be transferred and promoted across all departments to gain experience. The model also supported Westminster notions. Politically neutral public servants would be able to serve a government of any political persuasion. In return they would have secure employment and not be dismissed when the government changed, or when they provided controversial advice. This was the model adopted in Britain (Northcote Trevelyan, 1854).

Australia had a largely similar experience, starting with the same problems of patronage, corruption and maladministration, and introducing a career service model. Federation in 1901 allowed a clean sheet for development of a federal public service along these lines (Caiden, 1965: 33-4,58).

The US reforms were broadly similar to Britain, but with some local variations. It's central agency was not properly independent, and the president retained the right to hire and fire. The US also decided to allow entry at any age and any level. They claimed that this was more democratic than the British system which restricted employment to young people at the lowest level, but this also gave them freedom to continue appointing directly to the senior levels. The US reforms did not end the spoils system, but did lead to a distinction being drawn between career/merit positions and those which remained within the ambit of political patronage (Cayer, 1975; Curnow, 1989: 14; Van Riper, 1958).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public services were delivered through a Weberian model of bureaucratic public administration, matched by a bureaucratic model of employment designed to overcome the inefficiency of patronage and incompetence.

### ***The state of the career service by the 1970s***

As often happens, implementation fell short of the promise, and by the 1970s all three countries were dissatisfied with their career service model (Brown, 1970; Caiden, 1965; Cohen, 1965; Drewry and Butcher, 1988; Hecl, 1977; O'Neill and Hughes, 1998; RCAGA, 1976; Savas and Ginsburg, 1973).

Merit based recruitment was difficult to achieve. Examinations did not always identify the most capable people. Further, despite the intention of opening public services up to all people rather than the friends of politicians, merit was being defined in a way that favoured white males.

Despite the warnings, all countries ended up with promotion systems based on seniority. This rewarded time servers and removed the motivation of linking performance to advancement – the persistent would end up as department heads and the impatient or talented would leave.

A unified service was only minimally achieved – there were standard classification systems, but there was little mobility and most promotions tended to be within the one department. Services were once again becoming fragmented as different groups "escaped" from the employment framework.

Employment security and political neutrality were generally achieved. Unfortunately the processes to protect people from being dismissed for political reasons had also resulted in people not being dismissed for any reason including poor performance.

Savas and Ginsburg (1973: 165) suggested "In an effort to prevent itself from doing the wrong things – nepotism patronage, prejudice, favouritism, corruption – the civil service system had been perverted into a closed and meritless seniority system."

Unfortunately these issues became entangled in ideological debates regarding the role of governments. The very principles that were introduced to ensure efficiency were by then seen as causing inefficiency. Rather than see any deficiencies as ineffective implementation, critics saw the flaws as fundamental to the career service model, and proceeded to "throw the baby out with the bathwater".

## **The fall of career services**

### ***Reform from public administration to public sector management***

By the 1970s and 1980s, there was a combination of pressures. Disgruntlement with public sector bureaucracy, together with economic pressures and changing philosophies, led to calls for a new order. There was a growing belief that high levels of government expenditure and government employment were intrinsically harmful (Weller, 1996: 2). Rather than simply aiming for better administration, government recommended business as a suitable model for the reforms (Jackson, 1993: 1). Under managerialism, public administration was transformed into public sector management, and everyone struggled to set objectives, cut staff, sell off some parts of government, and make the remaining parts more efficient (Pollitt, 1990; Weller, 1996). More recent contractualism goes beyond importing private sector practices to suggesting that government should set policy and allow all services to be delivered by the private sector through contracts (Davis, 1998). Many of the changes to public sector employment stemmed from these changes, so I will review some of the tensions within the reforms before I look at the implications for employment.

*Imposing private sector techniques on the public sector*

The bureaucratic model of public sector employment was tied not just to the bureaucratic form of public administration, but also to Westminster conventions. Parker (1978: 351-352) noted that the doctrine of ministerial responsibility requires a role for officials: politicians are elected to make them **dependent** on the will of voters and political forces, which makes it likely that they will be partial in their dealings with citizens; while officials are appointed in order to make them independent of such pressures.

There will be inevitable tensions when you impose private sector management approaches on a complex public sector environment. Alford (1993b: 155) notes that by ignoring the constitutional and ethical context, managerialism can unduly elevate the value of efficiency at the expense of other important values, such as impartiality, probity, equity and participation. While there are some similarities between the public and private sectors, the differences are what makes it quite distinctive and are more important (McCallum, 1984: 18).

- (a) The "players" are different – the private sector has no counterpart for the elected representative, or a permanent opposition seeking to discredit them in the media.
- (b) The relationship with the market is different. Much government activity is to make up for deficiencies or adverse effects of competitive markets for the good of the community, or to produce non-market value such as the legal framework which underpins the market.
- (c) The objectives are different. The public sector has multiple and conflicting goals, which often stem from political and emotional rather than economic logic or profit.
- (d) The public sector has a more complex relationship with "users" who are never just customers but also citizens and voters. Sometimes their goal is to limit goods (such as public housing) or to impose unwelcome services (such as policing or taxation).
- (e) Public sector decision making is different. The timing and incidence of programs are designed to benefit current or potential supporters of government, so efficiency is not the prime consideration. Decisions and entitlements must be consistently and equitably applied and are open to review – where the private sector may provide special concessions, a public servant applying special concessions may be guilty of corruption.
- (f) There are vastly different accountabilities in each sector. Despite the purported focus on performance outcomes, public servants are still operating within a political environment. As long as parliamentary opponents are more concerned with the two percent of mistakes than the 98 percent of successes, political advantage will continue to take precedence over managerial efficiency, and public servants will remain accountable for inputs **and** outcomes.

(Refer Considine, 1988; McCallum, 1984:19; Pollitt, 1990; Weller, 1996)

All of these tensions are perhaps inevitable when you try to impose rational management techniques on a non-rational political environment. These tensions flow on to the changing model of public sector employment relations.

### ***Imposing a private sector human resource management approach***

Public services were restructured to remove those characteristics most closely associated with the discredited Weberian model and to become more like the private sector, and this impacted on the traditional model of public sector employment relations. However, rather than introduce a new model of employment, managerialism just chipped away at the career service model in adhoc ways, leaving an unstable hybrid of old and new approaches. Even the arch optimists of public sector reform Osborne and Gaebler acknowledged the difficulty of replacing traditional public sector human resource management with a new model (Gardner, 1993: viii; O'Neill and Hughes, 1983: 30).

More flexible and fluid forms of organisations were sought, in which managers were the key to success. New HR strategies were introduced, including many private sector arrangements. Private sector models of human resource management were lauded, but in practice the public sector tended to ignore all the positive aspects of private sector employment (such as training and rewards and motivation) and focus on negative aspects of simplifying processes for moving or terminating employees and curtailing employee rights. There was a trend away from the high-commitment model (which emphasises the importance of people and their knowledge) toward a task focused model which focuses on performance outcomes and often sees people as a cost rather than a resource. (Gardner, 1993: 139; Nethercote, 1989: 82). Davis (1998: 25-7) notes that virtues such as merit selection, equity, impartiality, high ethical standards, accountability and equality of treatment for clients might reflect good practice in any organisation, and some are protected by other laws, but they are not optional for the public sector.

### ***Reform of centralised co-ordination and the unified career service***

The independent central agency, designed to remove personnel matters from political decision makers, and to allow flexibility across a unified service, was gradually removed or weakened. Departments were given greater control of personnel matters, putting employment and promotion decisions back closer to political influence. Devolution to agencies also broke down the uniformity of conditions, which led to some competition between departments for staff. There was no longer a central manager of policies, able to coordinate conditions and reap economies of scale and specialisation (Alford, 1993).

### ***Lack of a clear strategy***

There is a difference between flexibility and the lack of a clear personnel strategy where the flexible parts form part of an integrated whole (Richards, 1990: 13). Complex issues such as attraction and retention of employees are best addressed through integrated approaches to management styles, training and development, organisational climate and culture, performance, recognition and reward, recruitment and selection, and pay and incentives.

There are a number of key examples of the lack of a clear personnel strategy or vision, as a result of devolution. Increasing pressure on agencies mean they will be more guided by financial strategies of their department than a holistic approach to developing and training up an internal labour market (Gardner and Palmer, 1997: 570). Downsizing has impacted on career paths, which were the major reward system. In the rush to devolve, most Australian public services stopped central collection of data (Nethercote, 1996), limiting the ability to review trends as a whole, such as monitoring the age or turnover of their workforces, or the number of temporary employees. Less tangible issues such as morale and organisational climate are often not being monitored. Contracting out rather than permanent employment leads to loss of corporate memory (Davis, 1998). Despite the recommendations of Northcote-Trevelyan and countless inquiries since, performance management has never been handled well in the public sector. While personnel functions were devolved, the determination of pay remains largely centralised, and even bargaining is rarely allowed beyond pre-set limits. There is considerable tension in opening up the internal labour market to invite in private sector employees and requiring private sector techniques, but on the other hand allowing agencies little or no control over wages issues.

These reforms raise questions of sustainability. A public service is a national resource, built up over many years, whose capacity to perform depends upon attracting and keeping good people. Dismembering the career service is creating problems both for now and the future (Stewart, 1998: 2).

### ***The impact on the merit principle***

The merit principle was seen as the key to efficiency, and is a foundation of traditional public sector recruitment, ensuring employment on merit and ability – what you know rather than who you know. It has always been a slippery concept waxing and waning and finding ways to accommodate non-meritorious practices such as seniority, and discrimination against women and other groups. However, merit is now being balanced with efficiency and managerial requirements. Devolution of selection processes to agencies potentially means a more partisan definition of merit. It was thought that to get rid of seniority it was necessary to open all positions to external recruitment. However it may have been possible to simply require internal applicants to compete, and go to the open market only when there was not an acceptable internal pool. There are many other examples of where merit has been balanced with efficiency (cost) considerations –

temporary and casual staff can often be employed without consideration of merit, departments look for ways to circumvent the merit principle in certain circumstances, mobility principles are not encouraged or applied, appeal processes which protect merit are watered down, and many senior positions are exempt from merit review (Curnow, 1989: 16; Hede, 1993; Hough and Norton, 1993: 41; Strickland, 1989: 254-5).

### ***The impact on tenure and political neutrality***

Traditionally public servants have been required to be subordinate to ministers, implement loyally the policies of the party in power, and not attempt to impose their own views by any means other than giving the minister the fullest and frankest advice – hence security of employment (Williams, 1985: 47). There was a clear distinction between the necessarily subordinate status of bureaucracy in action and its independent professional status in providing advice and intellectual input. An independent and secure public service providing impartial advice was seen to counter-balance the political masters' tendency to base decisions on short-term gains. (Smith and Corbett, 1999: 28) If you only employ laundered prophets who will play devils advocate (Young in Drewry and Butcher, 1988: 170).

Public services were criticised as not being responsive enough, and this was seen to justify use of political appointments. However a public service can be too responsive. There is a danger where they are not rewarded for general adherence to principles but rather their capacity to shift in the wind or pragmatism (Waterford in Weller, 1989: 4). Extremes of neutrality or apoliticisation can lead to poor results – for example, there would be no grounds to criticise the German official who served Hitler (Chapman in Williams 1985: 55). This leads to a complex question of to whom the public servant should be responsive – the people or the government of the day? There is also an increasing trend for parties to develop policies and programs while in opposition (Smith, 1989: 101), removing the role for public servants in providing advice until quite late stages. It is not clear why the apolitical career public service is now considered inadequate or less trustworthy (Drewry and Butcher, 1988; Weller, 1989: 4).

Politicisation has crept in in each of the three countries, as appointments and promotions are increasingly being made on the basis of partisan alignment. There are two major types of politicisation: patronage or partisanship, where appointment or promotion is based on party affiliations or sympathies regardless of merit; and political intimidation where public servants fear for their jobs unless they say what their political masters want to hear (Curnow, 1989: 17; Smith and Corbett, 1999: 27).

Appointing politically sympathetic senior officials ignores that ministers need fearless advice. Objective advice is conspicuously absent in a politicised public service, where a public servant's agreement with policies is guaranteed in advance by a politicised selection process (Smith and Corbett, 1999: 29; Wass, 1989: 50). The results can also be politically disastrous, if the full implications and side-effects of a policy or program



are not properly considered and the failure of the program is very public. Further, morale is not enhanced by the prospect that senior positions may be unattainable without a commitment to a political party, due to what happens to political appointees when governments change (Smith and Corbett, 1999). Beale (1989: 51) notes that while ministers are using more diverse sources of policy advice, the career service remains unique in that it is the only source which also has experience in implementation and administration of outcomes.

While the rules and regulations that were intended to insulate the public service from the capriciousness of political leadership also imposed rigidities that thwarted responsiveness, solving the responsiveness problem can open the door to patronage and other problems (Smith and Corbett, 1999: 40-1).

The Senior Executive Service concept is supposedly a compromise between purely political responsiveness and a purely bureaucratic approach of frank and fearless advice. It provides high level officials who are more changeable and mobile than bureaucrats but more institutional and enduring than political appointees (Coaldrake and Whitton, 1996: 186). These positions provide scope for significant politicisation, with insecure employment contracts, and no appeal mechanisms to scrutinise employment decisions (Smith and Corbett, 1999: 43).

### ***Reduced employment security***

Tenure provided a secure environment where public servants could give frank and fearless advice in the public interest and which of course politicians were free to accept or reject (McCallum, 1984: 8-9). Under classic notions of neutrality, nothing should happen on a change of government or minister, because the public servant can loyally serve any minister (Williams, 1985: 57). Agency control of recruitment has tended to have a short term rather than long term focus, as they pursue "numerical flexibility" through temporary, casual and contract employees who can be disengaged more simply and cheaply than permanent employees. As well as lower conditions, insecure employment leads to different power relationships, and it is tempting to protect your precarious job by not giving controversial advice. This has severe disadvantages for the quality of public administration (Gardner and Palmer, 1997; Williams, 1985).

Structural reforms such as downsizing, privatisation and contracting out, have led to increasing redundancies. Ironically there is no reverse merit in redundancy processes, so while the public service is downsizing to become more efficient it may actually only be getting rid of its more efficient employees (Selby Smith, 1993: 19; Waterford, 1993: 65).

There is little attempt to maintain a unified service. There is a preference for terminating temporary and contract staff rather than redeploying them throughout the service, resulting in a loss of corporate knowledge. The flexibility and benefits of an integrated

service are overlooked. The risks of non-ethical decisions, nepotism or corruption all increase when you use contract or temporary staff. It is no surprise that the system of employment will influence an employee's commitment to the employer's interests, and whether the employee finds it worthwhile to resist corruption (Corbett, 1996: 26; Whitton, 1998: 56-8). Insecure employment helps a public servant to answer the question of "responsive to whom", by necessitating responsiveness to the government of the day and its policies and programs.

## Conclusion

The bureaucratic form of public administration with its correspondingly bureaucratic employment relations was introduced to address problems of politicisation and inefficiency. It was criticised as being cumbersome, inefficient and unresponsive, and it needed review. However the reforms resulted in an adhoc collection of new and traditional personnel practices, watering down the conventions of merit, political neutrality and tenure. There has also been a loss of coordination, increasing duplication, and no strategic over-viewing of workforce trends common to all departments such as the ageing workforce, or hidden costs such as turnover or loss of corporate knowledge. Ironically, in an environment that emphasises measurement and performance, there appears to have been little evaluation of the effects of weakening the traditional career service. I suspect that despite all the reforms, the underlying problem of improving the performance of the public service has not been addressed. I also suspect that the attempt to improve efficiency and responsiveness will lead to a recurrence in the problems of politicisation, inefficiency and even corruption that arose in earlier times as a result of employees not having secure well-paid positions in a service based on values of ethics and accountability. Stewart (1998: 3) notes that there is little consideration of the type of public servant who will be attracted to and thrive in this type of environment.

I think there are two remedies. Firstly, the revitalisation of a strong central personnel policy agency, not to resume the controlling approach of previous agencies, but to provide some strategic steering and guidance of departments, and to provide those services where economies of scale make sense. Secondly, the introduction of a cohesive model of a high commitment career service, removing some of the outdated practices, but enshrining important values and principles such as tenure and merit which will actually enhance efficiency and the quality of administration. In short, there should be proper implementation of the model developed 150 years ago, which sought a mobile high performing workforce, neutral, stable, and promoted on the basis of merit. It is perhaps only a matter of time before the perceived inefficiency of a career service is forgotten, and the evils of not having a stable apolitical career service become apparent.

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