

Battle heightened for public servants to advise their ministers

- The Australian
- 12:00AM September 22, 2016

Joe Kelly



Australia's top public servants have less influence and are under more pressure than ever before to respond to the rise of a new "hyper-politics" requiring the provision of immediate yet considered advice to ministers to satisfy a 24-hour media cycle.

Former head of the Productivity Commission, Gary Banks, sounded the alarm yesterday on how a more brutal and more fractious political culture threatened the ability of public servants to provide quality advice to top levels of government and have it acted on.

Professor Banks, now chief executive of the Australian and New Zealand School of Government, said the rise of greater numbers of young political staff in ministerial offices, heightened political instability and less public trust in government had led to a "more contestable environment for influence".

"I do think the sort of politics that we've all seen, including almost having six prime ministers in six years ... has left its mark on the public service and the relationship between public servants and, at the political level, their ministers," he said.

“Changes of ministers, changes of governments, are in themselves difficult things for the public service to come to terms with. Every new government that comes in looks slightly with suspicion at the current crop of public servants.”

Speaking at *The Australian's* “Beyond the Boardroom” series in Canberra, organised in partnership with the Australian Institute of Management, Professor Banks argued that departmental secretaries were now doing battle with political advisers to win the ear of ministers.

“The ministers’ offices themselves, I think, are much more geared up to the issues ... needed to survive in the day to day cut and thrust of political life. So this turbulence, this hyper-government, is quite a challenging thing,” he said. “Ministers are increasingly looking for really quick advice. They’re responding to the day’s headlines ... and the public service actually isn’t all that great at giving quick answers.

“It’s a much more contestable environment for influence and I think we’ve seen the public service dropping in influence a little bit ... Increasingly, if you get to the top of the public service your job is less secure than it has ever been.”

Professor Banks was joined on a panel at the forum yesterday by Australian Public Service Commissioner John Lloyd and Digital Transformation Office acting head Radi Kovacevic.

Mr Lloyd defended the public service, saying it was still well equipped to do a good job of providing frank advice to government but he did concede it was “more challenging”.

“There is the 24-hour media cycle and at times you’ve just got to say to ministers, ‘Look, if you give a week or a few days or two weeks, you will get a much more considered and helpful and accurate advice’,” he said. “It’s up to the public servants to call that at times, to say that, ‘If you jump out quickly, there are risks that things will go astray’.”

Mr Lloyd, a former Australian Building and Construction Commissioner, also noted the “platoon” of advisers to senior cabinet ministers in the modern political era, saying it was the responsibility of both ministers and public servants to establish effective working relations early on.

Professor Banks said that to establish trust with ministers, public servants were becoming more responsive to the agenda and needs of incoming governments, declaring it a “change that had to happen”.

However, he warned that there was also a growing sense of self-preservation in the bureaucracy that was leading talented people to balk at taking up more senior roles.

“One of the things we hear is that these days a lot of deputies don’t really aspire to the top job,” he said.

“They think one out, one back is perfect, you know. They’re far less exposed ... They’re not as in such a tenuous position as somebody who’s heading a department these days.”