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'Out of the blue' policies must end: Gary Banks

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Professor Banks slammed a range of recent government policies as coming “out of the blue”, lacking key elements or produced without key stake holders having apparently been consulted. **Photo: Jim Rice**

Verona Burgess

The rising public distrust of policy and politicians must be combatted by the restoration of proper processes of policy making and expertise in government departments, according to former Productivity Commission head Gary Banks.

Professor Banks criticised “a decade in which spin has often triumphed over substance in policy making”, slamming a range of government policies as coming “out of the blue”, lacking key elements or produced without key stake holders having apparently been consulted.

Speaking in the Garran Oration to the Institute of Public Administration Australia annual conference in Canberra on Thursday, Professor Banks blamed the continued “efficiency dividend” cuts to public service departments for forfeiting a critical mass of policy expertise.

“To be judged successful, policy needed not only to do good but to be seen doing it,” he said.

The rise of the ministerial office and the 24/7 media cycle were also key contributors along with the advent of opposition-ism and the erosion of public servants speaking, he said.

Professor Banks said the public may not have a detailed understanding of particular policy proposals but most recognised bad processes or poor administration when they saw them.

“Anyone exposed to the news in recent times could hardly have missed stories of policy appearing to come out of the blue such as the baby bonus, future fund, ban on cattle exports to Indonesia and the National Broadband Network,” he said.

He also mentioned the National Water Initiative, funding for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the free dental program and the Timor and Malaysia solutions for asylum seekers.

He slammed the lack of transparency for programs such as subsidies to car assemblers and the Treasury's carbon modelling. And advocated a reversal of the recent changes to the Freedom of Information laws which he said had "eroded the provision of robust advice".

According to Professor Banks, policies where key stake holders had apparently not been consulted included state governments on hospital findings, miners on the mining tax, employee representatives on WorkChoices or employers on the Fair Work Act.

There had also been the avoidance of long established and well regarded practices such as regulatory impact statements and the bypassing of Cabinet scrutiny, "abrupt reversals to previously announced policy positions without adequate explanation or justification" such as the carbon tax, the 457 visa scheme, gambling regulation and union access to business premises.

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