

## Financial Review

[Gary Banks](#)

### The Australian public service needs to pick up its game

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These days the public service is all too often in reactive mode, says Gary Banks. **Photo: Louie Douvis**

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In a recent poll of public trust in the professions, politicians were ranked just below real estate agents, talkback radio hosts and sex workers, and eclipsed for the wooden spoon only by door-to-door salespeople.

If the opinion polls are even broadly indicative, the public is unlikely to have confidence in government policies and programs that are seen to be the product of politicians alone. It is crucially important, therefore, that the public service is doing, and is judged to be doing, a solid job in advising and informing government policy decisions.

Members of the public may not have a detailed understanding of particular policy proposals, nor take the trouble to do so, but most people recognise bad processes or poor administration when they see them. Anyone exposed to news or current affairs in recent times could hardly have missed stories of policy initiatives appearing to come "out of the blue", programs being announced without key elements resolved, stakeholders not having been consulted, and abrupt policy reversals without adequate explanation.

To be judged successful, a policy must do good and be seen to do good. Based on the second condition (if not both) we must count among recent policy failures: the carbon and mining taxes; the National Broadband Network; and key strands of immigration policy and industrial relations policy. None of these major policies have overcome contention, or won sufficient support to endure. Indeed, the Coalition has just won office promising to reverse them (and it has already made a start).

In these and other areas of policy failure, the underlying problem is that, for various reasons, the initiatives were neither adequately informed by evidence, nor adequately "stress tested".

## Speaking truth to power

It is an important function of the public service to assist political representatives in these essential tasks. That said, there are limits to the ability of even the most able departmental adviser to press a course of action that is not accepted politically. Senior public servants must perform a delicate balancing act: one in which they are worthy of the public's trust, but also retain the trust of their ministers while "talking truth to power". This is the essence of leadership in the public sector.

The trouble is that this essential role has become a lot harder, with influence on policy decisions shifting decisively from public servants to private advisers. The trend has coincided with a change in the make-up of ministers' offices from people with policy skills to those with political, communication or media skills. While an understandable reaction to the advent of round-the-clock media, a lack of policy expertise has reduced the scope for departments to get support, particularly where political "issues" are seen to arise.

The challenges to an effective public service presented by these developments have been compounded, in my view, by the subtle erosion of the capacity of our most senior public servants to "speak truth to power".

## Public service's reactive mode

These days the public service is all too often in reactive mode, having to justify, and find a least-bad way of implementing, a decision made in the heat of the moment without the benefit of its advice.

If trust in public policy is to be restored, this needs to be remedied.

The foundation requirement is a properly functioning cabinet system, such that all significant policy decisions can be well informed and adequately debated. And, while "mandarins" are now a relic of the past – desirably so – department heads need more protection against termination for giving unwelcome advice than now exists. The provision of frank (even fearless) advice would also be enhanced by reversing changes to the Freedom of Information Act that, perversely, are acting against the public interest.

By the same token, transparency should be enhanced where it does matter, such as in cost-benefit analyses for major government projects.

For their part, public service leaders need to uphold those processes and institutions already at their disposal for influencing policy decisions. A key one is Regulation Impact Assessment, which can be a useful counter to the "act first, ask questions later" syndrome. There is also a need to build a "culture of ideas" (and respect for evidence) within departments, such that policy issues and options can be well canvassed and transcend the immediate concerns of the office.

Restoring the basis for trust in public policy comes down to two words, "good process". Without it, trust will remain low and policy success elusive. Getting it back is an imperative if Australia is to meet the undoubted policy challenges ahead.

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Gary Banks heads the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. He delivered the Garran Oration for the Institute of Public Administration Australia at its annual conference in Canberra on Thursday.

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