

Governance Perspectives: Australia

Interview with Lynelle Briggs

The Public Services of Australia and Singapore have much in common and are dealing with similar issues. In this interview, Lynelle Briggs, Australia's Public Service Commissioner, touches on some of these issues such as gearing the Service towards whole-of-government thinking, managing the Public Service's interface with non-governmental organisations, and equipping public servants with the skills to work effectively with the political leadership. She emphasises that public servants must identify with the larger, over-arching goals of the government, instead of thinking only in terms of their individual agencies.

As Public Service Commissioner, what is your vision for the Australian Public Service? What are your key priorities and concerns? How do you see your role in public sector reform?

The public service is going through a period of reflection, thinking about its position, its roles and responsibilities, whether it is still relevant in the world. I see my role as trying to strengthen the confidence of the Australian Public Service in the Australian Public Service. We operate in a very devolved environment. People work within employment conditions in particular agencies rather than service-wide conditions. One thing new we are particularly keen to do as senior leaders is to reinforce the strength of the full civil service in Australia.

In order to do that, I think there are particular contributions I can make from the Australian Public Service Commission. One way is to emphasise the Public Service Act, which is the piece of legislation that governs the employment of all public servants, such that it is thoughtfully considered by every public servant. This act is unique in the world because it puts together a

series of values which are to govern public servants' behaviours, and a code of conduct under which they are to operate. We find that we need to reinforce these values on a regular basis—that they are consistent values across the Public Service is important for everyone.

The second area is increasing the professionalism of the Australian Public Service. I see this working in a number of different ways. First, we need to put a lot of effort in building up the core competencies of our public servants, whether they are operating in a policy, service delivery, regulatory or corporate environment. We need to make sure they are trained in those areas and they understand what their roles and responsibilities are, as well as what their values are and how they should manage themselves as they operate in this environment.

The third area is the leadership in the Public Service. My organisation puts a lot of emphasis on leadership training, and particularly on how to assist our senior people in doing their jobs as they manage people, and as they manage the interfaces with other agencies, business, communities, and with ministers.

We also try to give public servants guidance in particular areas. In recent years, there's been some concern that the Australian Public Service has become politicised and that we're not holding true to our values and being an apolitical public service. We're about to release some guidance on good practice in relationships between public servants and ministers and their officers to help public servants understand how they should manage themselves in a particular situation.

I'm also talking a lot to public servants about the role of the Public Service in the Australian economy, and try to reemphasise the fact that it's the public service which has contributed significantly to the strength of the Australian

economy and to the depth of our social fabric. The Public Service has not only developed proposals that have led to improvements in areas such as social services, health or education, but has also been responsible for implementing the reforms, managing the messaging and changes to these policies to make them work more effectively than they might otherwise do.

The final area is that the Australian Public Service has always tended to be a reformist public service. Now we're asking ourselves whether we might have become a little bit complacent in recent years, and how we can do something about that. So we are focusing on what might be the next steps for the Public Service in this area.

We are also looking at how we ensure that we continue to focus on longer-term policy and research, and where we should focus our effort. It's clear in our country, for example, that we have not done nearly enough work on environmental issues. We also need to do more work on identifying what the next stages of productivity might be, where improvements to economic growth might come from, and what impediments to growth or improvements to the economy we need to deal with to make progress. In social policy, we have some particular issues with our health system and how we might finance that as we go forward, and how we manage crisis situations such as bird flu.

In Singapore we are thinking of our leaders as mentors and coaches. Is Australia thinking along those lines?

Yes we are. We have seen in recent years that our leaders are oftentimes incredibly busy and can neglect that side of the business. We are putting renewed emphasis on our leadership team being available to their people at a collective level and individual level. Collectively, we find that if public sector leaders aren't talking to their staff about the decisions they are taking, or the considerations that are in their mind, or the issues that are affecting their decision-making, then public servants don't learn well.

At the same time, we find that Australians expect a lot of personal interaction with their managers and their leaders and that means that we have to consciously tell this to our leaders and have them actively engaged in working one-on-one with people on how they can do their jobs better. In the past, when performance was measured largely on the delivery of outcomes, this stuff did

not matter so much. But these days where performance is fundamentally dependent on you being able to work effectively with other people, you really do need to have to work with people on their attitudes and their behaviours to help them perform most effectively; it is a very important part of business of the modern public servant.

In your State of Service Speech in July 2005, you talked about the identity of the Australian Public Service. What do you mean by that?

Oftentimes in a devolved environment like the one we have, people identify more with their agency and the work of their agency than of the Australian Public Service as such. This is a challenge for us because we think the modern public servant is not necessarily about delivering pension or healthcare. Their work is about delivering specific outcomes from the government, for the government; it is about employment generation or a healthy, safe or secure Australian community. So we think that their thinking needs to be whole-of-government thinking as opposed to individual agency thinking. That's why it's important that we talk about the Australian Public Service as well as its image and the integrity of that image, and support it through supporting its leaders and supporting its activities as a collective group.

How do you identify and define the whole-of-government indicators? How do you bring all the agencies' deliverables to that level of whole-of-government?

The first thing that you've got to define is what you're seeking from your whole-of-government activity. And for us, that was really hard at the start because people coming from different agencies kept their own objectives. People from social security had an objective of paying income security payments, people from the employment department that ran training for the unemployed had an objective of training the unemployed, people in the education sector had an objective of increasing their skill sets, but they didn't come together and say their ultimate objective is employment. We had to do a lot of work to try to move people together along a single goal that they could all sign up to, and then have them start to think of their programmes in terms of that single goal.

In the course of doing that, we found that there were certain skill sets and behaviours we were

really lacking. We didn't have a collegiate way of working; we weren't used to focusing on outcomes at a whole-of-government level rather than a specific detail. And we weren't necessarily very good at negotiating. So we started to talk about the skill sets that go into operating effectively in the whole-of-government way.

As well as that, we started at the leadership level to talk about working together and why it was important to work as a team. We put out a publication called "Working Together" to all public servants to emphasise that. I think it is fortunate that our younger recruits to the Public Service have a much stronger collegiate way of working. They are much less bound by the rigidities of different agencies than people of my generation might have been.

But our challenge is the big bunch of people in the middle and how they get on board as well. We are now thinking that we have to target those groups for particular training. How do we make whole-of-government work in practice? We see this as an evolutionary process and we are really at the early stages of this. We are doing better in some areas than the others, such as security and defence, and natural disasters—we are very good at cooperating in a crisis. But the important thing for us is how we make whole-of-government working part of the everyday dealings of the public service.

How do you manage the tension between social and economic objectives in a typical policy dilemma?

Each country has certain national ambitions and goals and my country has come through an interesting period around this. We wanted to free up our economy; but we also wanted to build up the standards of our healthcare and the strength of our social safety nets. I can't overstate the importance of collective thinking in Australia on these issues. There was a lot of collective thinking on these issues, but there was a lot of sectoral interest in particular areas. In the health area, we had a lot of issues with the doctors concerning universal healthcare. In the manufacturing sector, we had a lot of issues with all sorts of manufacturing industries around reductions and tariffs. Amongst many producers we had big concerns about the floating of our dollar and freeing up of our financial system. We simply had to tackle them one after the other as we went forward.

These days, consensus is emerging around policy in a few areas. One of them is that we need to continue to liberalise our labour market, but again there are sectoral concerns around that. Another is that our health system needs more work. Another is how we should balance the public and private provision of education and health, whether it should be universal health system or education system. This is one of the great challenges for us at the moment. As our people become wealthier, they are more able to afford to go to the private sector for services. Our challenge is that our public healthcare system tends to be high quality, particularly in terms of providing healthcare, but it is also where doctors receive their education. We don't want to see that undermined.

The environment is another massive challenge. We are a very big and dry country. We're being affected directly by pollution in Asia and Europe. That's affecting our climate and we're seeing far more extremes in climates than we've experienced before. This is on top of our own degradation of the forests and the soils. We've really got to work out how we manage our ecosystem better than we've done in the past.

So in some ways, generation of policy ideas comes about from considerable research about what needs to be done, about what the issues are, from concerns from various parts of the community, but also I think from thoughtful generation and driving activity within the Public Service about what needs to be done next, how we should strategise the way forward.

The Australian Public Service has developed the capabilities to negotiate with the NGOs which Singapore is still in the process of developing. How was this done?

This has come easier to some public servants than others. The people in the economic areas are the least comfortable with communications with others. The rest of us, I would say, have been dragged reluctantly there. With our ministers in particular, saying, "It's not just my responsibility to deal with this interface. It's yours and your policies are going to be better if you understand what these people are saying, but also if you listen to their concerns and try to address those concerns as part of policy reform."

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people are saying and what the issues are. But we've learnt to do this and also how to "sell" our proposals or communicate them. In the past, all communication of policy changes was left to ministers. These days, every agency would have a communication and a marketing area, and would work a lot on putting messages out about what the programmes are; also doing focus groups, testing policy ideas or marketing approaches. We bring together groups of people and we talk to them about the policy issue, and get their views to work through effectively, particularly in the marketing area.

How do you manage the relationship between ministers and public servants?

It's very tricky. I think the longer you are a public servant, the more you understand how to play these relationships. Our survey work has told us that about 20% of our public servants have contact each year with ministers or their officers. That's a lot of contact in a public service that spreads as far and wide as the Australian Public Service. You would expect that the senior levels, those working in policy or in Canberra, are more likely have more contact with the ministers.

But there are a few things that come out clearly. The first thing is that public servants understand the values under which to operate, that we serve the government of the day as professional public servants. Within that context, of that 20% of public servants who've had contact with ministers, about 33% of those find those relationships challenging. So it really requires them to think about how they manage themselves. What they do say though, is that where their leaders have talked to them about how they managed the same issues themselves, it increases their confidence to be able to deal with those issues effectively when they affect them. So there is a real message there about the importance of leadership in the Public Service in this area. We're

emphasising that, and what we found between the 2004 report and the one we're producing later in 2005 is that there has been some increase in the confidence levels in dealing with those relationships.

Does that correspond to them being emboldened to challenge their ministers?

I suspect it does, and we have a lot more discussion in Australia about the need for us to provide independent advice. We went through a really difficult period about four years ago when there was a lot of questioning about whether or not we were politicised or what we were. And there has been a lot of reflection in the Public Service as a result of that. I think these days, public servants are more willing to say, "No Minister, I won't go there, that's your responsibility, that's not ours". I think that's a very healthy relationship.

In that context, what role does the Human Resource department play? Will it be laissez-faire?

No. I've got quite strong views on this. We made a big mistake some years ago when we went through some processes of outsourcing some of our activities. Many agencies outsourced their entire HR areas because they didn't appreciate that strategic HR work was fundamental to their organisations and we're reeling from it now—it was a huge mistake. It's okay to outsource the processing of personnel activities. But now we've got to really put a lot of emphasis on having some skilled people in an organisation who know the organisation, know the skills requirements, and can work on what the skill needs of the future might be with managers in different areas, and work out succession arrangements, training and support, coaching and mentoring and how that might work in the organisation. We need to do this because the Australian labour market is

contracting as our population ages. We won't have the same supply of younger workers coming through as we have had in the past and we're getting increasingly tough in our expectations of our people and we're demanding more of them. So we've got to return some of the favour by investing in our people, in particular our younger people who expect that of us if they are to give us their loyalty and stay with us.

What do you think are the collaborations that Australia and Singapore can have?

The strongest point I would make is that Australia and Singapore have much more in common than many other countries in the region. Whenever I meet Singaporeans in any part of the Public Service, I have been struck by their talent, their intellect and the commonality of issues facing us. In development stages, it's quite consistent. In terms of working together, some of the things that have been identified is the general area of leadership training, looking at what each of us is doing and how we play the interface between the sorts of training that you might provide in the Public Service Commission, Australian Civil Service College with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Government or with the Australia-New Zealand School of Government in Australia, and how we balance the academic training with the practical training.

The dialogue on governance in organisations is also really important. We may have gone further than you to date in terms of devolution and putting activities under boards, and you're thinking about some of those issues. I would say of our experiences, our mistakes, what not to do, and where we're going now could be of help to you in this area.

One of the ways you can help us is by showing us some of your leading edge initiatives, because a bit of healthy competition is good, and understanding where innovation is heading is really important. As I was saying earlier, we don't want to become complacent but we see we are. I was hearing about the work going in IT—what you have in your public service is a stronger integrated system of IT than we do. It's in our dreams that we have that capability. But it's good for me to go back to Australia and say this, "Singapore has got this, why can't we do this?" That is good and healthy. And more generally, because of the closeness between our nations and the similar issues and approach to things that we have, a healthy dialogue is a healthy thing to

have. It's really good for the region.

This interview was conducted by Tan Soo San and Andrew Kwok from the Institute of Policy Development. ■