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Craft and Capacity in the Public Service

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Abstract

Over the past eight years, debates about Australia's public service have evolved from being focused mainly on skills and capacities to one now increasingly concerned about the operating environment for career officials, their ability to fulfil their stewardship obligations and to practice their 'craft'. In this article, I track those changes and ask what is the craft of public administration? How should we understand it? Are concerns it is imperilled or has been lost valid or overblown? I draw on the observations of current and former senior officials, and the findings of recent Capability Reviews. My primary focus is on the APS, since here is where the debate has been most public and direct. I note that the focus of concern has shifted from public servants towards ministers, who have been largely absent from public sector reform initiatives of the past 40 years.

Keywords

Craft of public administration; policy capacity; policy skills; public sector reform.

Introduction

It has been a tumultuous time for public servants in Australian jurisdictions. If we take the change of federal government from Howard to Rudd in 2007 as our starting point, we can trace a period of frequent, discontinuous and disruptive change: of party, leader, of policy and senior public service leadership. We can observe too, important shifts in the context of policy and decision-making: the spectre of economic crisis and its attendant consequences for market, investor and consumer confidence; environmental challenges: drought, serious and frequent natural disaster events in almost all jurisdictions, New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region. As with the potential for pandemics, terrorism and other security threats requiring cooperation and coordination between governments at all levels and internationally, our mutual inter-dependence and enmeshment with global systems has seldom been more evident; demanding corresponding adjustments in our governance processes.

The pressures and strains on key institutions and actors were apparent. A cohort of experienced political leaders retired. Their reasons varied, but all cited the physical and mental toll of long periods in their jobs (see, for example, Bracks 2012). They questioned whether leaders' tenures would or should be truncated under the demands of more volatile electoral politics and the relentless scrutiny of the 24/7 news media. A long-standing federal government fell. A highly successful prime minister was swept from office, losing his own seat in the process. The contrast to his successor, the energetic and relatively youthful Kevin Rudd could scarcely have been greater. From his first days in office, Rudd set a frenetic pace for his ministers

and senior officials; and for State and Territory leaders and their officials too, through his ambitious program to reform the federation and ‘end the blame game’. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) was in overdrive, as first ministers and treasurers overhauled federal-state financial relations and worked to address shared policy priorities. Concurrently, COAG agreed three tranches of stimulus measures intended to cushion the economy from the worst effects of the global financial crisis. While successful in preventing a collapse in confidence, key stimulus programs challenged the delivery capacities of all tiers of government. Later, they brought political pain as programs became mired in controversy over cost over-runs and problems in implementation (see, for example, Althaus 2011).

By mid 2010, a first-term prime minister was replaced by his deputy after his Cabinet colleagues rejected his domineering leadership style. A period of uncertainty followed when the August 2010 federal election delivered the nation’s first hung parliament in more than 40 years. After 17 days of often-tense negotiations, Julia Gillard emerged as Australia’s first female Prime Minister, leading a precarious minority government under constant assault from a new Opposition leader and his reinvigorated team. Then Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Ian Watt (2013, 2) reflected on this period of change in a speech to the APS:

Importantly... throughout the last three and a half years of “interesting times”

- Prime Ministerial change, minority Government and a change of Government
- the APS has continued to deliver for the Government and for the public – be it policy advice or programme development, implementation and delivery.

We adjusted to changed circumstances and, got on with the job. That was expected of us, and that is what we have done. We can, I believe, look back with pride on that achievement; and we should. We can also hope, like very many Australians, that our recent history is not repeated too often or too soon.

Meanwhile, state and territory officials faced other challenges: in-government leadership transitions and in New South Wales, a parade of premiers – a trend that did not cease with the crushing defeat of the deeply unpopular government of then Premier Kristina Keneally. From 2008, Coalition governments steadily supplanted Labor's hegemony. By 2014, only South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory had Labor administrations. Budget deficits, constrained revenues and continued growth in expenditures in education, health and disaster reconstruction and recovery brought pressure from the ratings agencies. New governments implemented immediate cuts in public spending, often through massive reductions in public sector employees; they initiated Commissions of Audit and efficiency scrutiny exercises. There was unprecedented turnover and churn at all levels of state public services - especially at the top. New administrations sought to remake the leadership of the public service through strategic appointments, often from outside the jurisdiction and occasionally from outside of the bureaucracy.

It is pertinent for readers of the AJPA to consider the extent and the pace of the changes highlighted here. They help to account for why in the eight years since 2007, debate about Australia's public service has evolved from one focused mainly on skills and capacities (Tiernan 2011; Lindquist and Tiernan 2011), to one now

increasingly concerned about the operating environment for career officials and their ability to fulfil their stewardship obligations and to practice their 'craft'. In this article, I track those changes and ask what is the craft of public administration? How should we understand it and are concerns it is imperilled or has been lost valid, or overblown? I draw on the observations of current and former senior officials, and the findings of recent Capability Reviews. My primary focus is on the APS, since here is where the debate has been most public and direct. I note that the focus of concern has shifted from the public servants towards ministers, who have been largely absent from public sector reform initiatives of the past 40 years.

From capacity to craft

Four years ago, I edited a Special Issue of this journal (70 (4)) that reported the findings of an ARC-funded research project that examined the policy advisory capacity of the APS across key policy sectors: economic policy, Defence, central coordination, housing policy, intergovernmental relations, and for a perspective on the capacity to deliver, the implementation of the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program. The project had a longitudinal focus. Authors were asked to consider the 20 year period from the 1987 machinery of government changes, and to weigh the consequences of major public sector reforms, including the political management reforms (contract employment for agency heads; the growth in the numbers and influence of ministerial staff) and the move to the new Parliament House in 1988. In practice, our cases covered timespans of 40 to 60 years. Our contributors traced continuities and changes in concerns about the public service's ability to support decision-making through its policy advisory functions.

The catalyst for the project was what we described as a ‘discourse’ of declining policy skills (Tiernan 2011; Tiernan and Wanna 2006). In Australia and internationally, a substantial literature had emerged expressing concern about the policy capacities and capabilities of career public services. Across Westminster-style systems particularly from the mid-1990s, a strong critique emerged about the quality of policy advice, the performance and efficiency of policy units, the efficacy and relevance of their research and analytical skills, and the extent to which the public service had the ability to support decision-making in a more complex, dynamic, interconnected, pluralised and contestable policy environment.ⁱ

The findings of our research are worth revisiting because they illuminate the themes that pervaded the 2010 Review of Australian Government Administration (the Moran Review) (see Lindquist 2010; Mulgan 2010). These were a perceived lack of strategic analysis and ‘creative ideas’ from the public service; advice that was insufficiently informed by and concerned with policy implementation; and the need to more explicitly address the ‘stewardship’ role of departmental secretaries. We found that advisory systems are diverse and competitive – that agencies rise and fall and that there is rivalry for position and influence. We found that demand-side factors – governmental priorities and decision-making styles condition these competitive dynamics; and that advisory systems are shaped by path-dependencies that can leave them ill-equipped to meet the demands of a new group of decision-makers. Agency heads confront the dilemma of trying to balance their stewardship obligations with expectations of responsiveness. In particular, they face difficulties in maintaining investment in advisory skills and capacities for which there is no

effective demand from a current administration, but which a new government might want or need. A failure to respond to demand for advice from an incoming government can undermine confidence in the ability and willingness of the public service to serve a new administration.

Our survey of key policy sectors in Australian government concluded that first ministers are a critical influence on the quality of policy advising in the short and the longer term. Centralisation has and continues to be the persistent trend in the evolution advisory arrangements at all levels of Australian government and internationally, but it has consequences. Concerns expressed by John Howard in 1996 and Kevin Rudd in 2007 demonstrated that leader style and preferences can shape and constrain future capacity, particularly when political parties have different expectations about the role of the public service in policy advising (see, for example, Tiernan and Weller 2010).

Significantly for the purposes of this article, we found that while policy analytic capabilities should lead to more astute advising, specific advisory skills are also crucial. They develop through use, ongoing interaction and importantly, experience – direct or vicarious. If advisory skills are not used, are diminished, or ‘organised out’, they atrophy and decline (Lindquist and Tiernan 2011). We identified emerging concerns that the ‘craft’ skills of the public service had, or were being lost; that officials were less clear than they once were about their roles and responsibilities. This found concrete expression in the Capability Review of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), which urged the department’s executive to

clarify and better communicate to staff and stakeholders the 'PM&C craft'. The

Review team recommended that:

For PM&C to deliver on its vision of supporting the Prime Minister... it is critical that all groups within the department put into practice the PM&C craft – a set of skills and ways of working that has developed over many years but has never (to the review team's knowledge) been formally codified. During the review, the Secretary identified the need to acknowledge and articulate the craft to ensure that capability is built and sustained within PM&C. It would be very useful for the craft to be more formally described and taught, and supported through a centrally-driven people strategy. The current practice of teaching and learning the craft on the job means that it is not consistently understood and practised, and could potentially be lost. Indeed the risk that the craft will be lost is accentuated by other factors, including high turnover and a need to focus on addressing urgent and important tasks (APSC 2012, 20).

The team that conducted the Capability Review of PM&C comprised two external reviewers:

- Jeff Whalan, AO – a former Chief Executive Officer of Centrelink, who had previously served in Deputy Secretary and other senior executive positions in central and line agencies. Whalan left the public service to become a consultant who specialises in governance, performance and executive leadership development.
- Roger Beale, AO – a highly experienced former Departmental Secretary who was central to some of the key economic and public sector

reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. Beale retired as Secretary of the Department of Environment and Heritage in March 2004 to become a consultant with the Allen Consulting Group and later PWC.

The third, internal APS reviewer was Liza Carroll, then a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and later PM&C. She is now Associate Secretary, Indigenous Affairs in PM&C.

I mention the Review team's experience because their diagnosis of the causes of declining craft skills was implicit to their recommendation to the PM&C executive that it needed to act in order to preserve them. Their analysis highlights the loss of tacit knowledge and traditions; the risks to institutional memory of frequent organisational restructuring, turnover and churn within departments. It echoes the scholarship on the consequences, both intended and unintended, of successive waves of public sector reform on the career public service: its relationship with ministers, its ability to provide policy advice, to support the implementation of policy, to coordinate across the APS and with other tiers of government. I review this briefly before moving to define what the reviewers might have meant by the 'craft', which is similar to long-standing scholarly perspectives that conceptualise public administration as a craft.

Why has craft been diminished?

It is impossible to disentangle the forces that have both driven and accompanied reforms to the public sectors of many advanced democracies since the late 1960s. Exogenous forces have included: public expectations about the role of government, demographic, economic, social and technological changes that have affected all

institutions. Key among these are increasingly complex and interdependent global systems and supply chains and problems that defy jurisdictional boundaries. Other changes are more directly associated with public sector reforms. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) distinguish three broad 'models' of public sector reform in the 12 countries that formed the basis for their empirical research. These are: the New Public Management (NPM), the New Public Governance (NPG) and the Neo-Weberian State (NWS). Core to each was a 'dominant discourse' and proposed strategies for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government. Australia is among the group of countries that 'started earliest and went furthest' in embracing NPM, which Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, 10) define as 'a bundle of concepts and practices' that included a greater emphasis on performance, the application of business techniques and market mechanisms to the management of public services.

Informed by theories from management, several strands of economics and by the international transfer of ideas among political and policy elites, many reform initiatives contained contradictory ideas or ideas that posed insoluble dilemmas for career officials charged with implementing them. These remained unresolved as criticisms of NPM intensified and governments adopted a third wave of reforms focused on governance through networks and partnerships.

Debates about capacity and craft are most closely associated with concerns about the consequences - intended and unintended, of the 'political management reforms' and associated changes in the behaviour of central executives and relationships between ministers and senior officials. Peters (2013, 12) describes this relationship and the relative power of elected and unelected officials as 'one of the central issues in contemporary governance'. Politicians' quest for greater political

control over career bureaucracies has been at the core of public sector reform agendas internationally. It is widely characterised as the 'politicisation' of the public service. This is much more than a blurring of the boundaries between politics and administration. Instead, as Kane and Patapan (2006, 715) note:

The old way of conceptualizing the boundary between political and administrative spheres no longer made sense once the capacities and qualities that were appropriate to the political sphere were expected of the [public] service at all levels.

A permanent, non-partisan career public service is a feature of Westminster-style political systems (Rhodes and Weller 2005). Country practices vary according to local beliefs, traditions and administrative styles, but the shared rationale for its existence is to provide continuity of administration and institutional memory to the government of the day. From the 1960s, however, political leaders became increasingly dissatisfied with the performance and responsiveness of unelected officials. The Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration (RCAGA; the Coombs Commission) marked the formal beginning of a forty-year period of almost continuous reform and change to the Australian public sector. Every Commonwealth government since Whitlam, and most sub-national administrations have instigated 'reforms' of one kind or other to their public services – a pattern that Hood and Lodge (2007, 59) have described in the British context as 'Civil Service Reform Syndrome'. Listing a litany of reform agendas implemented at national level, they note:

Such initiatives come and go, overlap and ignore each other, leaving behind residues of varying size and style.

Critics and supporters have acknowledged that continuous, inconsistent and usually partial reform efforts, driven primarily from the top-down, have had unintended consequences. These include:

- A ‘hollowing out’, or ‘thinning’ of state capacity and institutions.
- Changes that have tilted the balance between ministers and public servants decisively in favour of elected officials, to the detriment of ‘frank and fearless’ advice.
- Erosion of policy capacity.
- Fragmentation and profound challenges for central coordination and control despite efforts to reinforce the centre.
- Loss of institutional memory.
- A loss of accountability.
- The decline of administrative process and record keeping.
- The loss of capacity for long-term thinking.

Such problems have accompanied public sector reforms across different types of political systems. For the purposes of this paper, my primary concern is the cumulative impact of the political management reforms, which disrupted conventional understandings of the political-administrative relationship, and created puzzles that minister and senior officials encounter and seek to reconcile in their everyday work (Rhodes and Tiernan 2015; ‘tHart 2014).

During the Capability Review, the PM&C executive explained that the department’s craft encompassed: ‘what we do; how we do it; and how we organise for it’. The Review report elaborates a range of functions under each of these three dimensions (APSC 2012, 10-14). The PM&C Secretary described the department’s

craft as ‘fundamentally about two things: knowing what matters, and working on the things that matter with the right combination of people and skills across government’ (Watt 2012a, 3). He outlined a passionate defence of the enduring relevance of the career public service, noting that:

The APS will, from time to time, face challenges in remaining the policy advisers, developers, implementers and delivers of choice for the Australian Government. There is, after all, competition in all these fields, and that is a healthy spur for all of us.

Why do I consider it important that we retain that role? Simply because we have something unique to offer in it, including:

- the capacity to stand aside from vested interests and to properly support governments focusing on governing in the national interest;
- experience in what works in the Commonwealth Government and what doesn’t; and
- being accountable to current and future governments for our actions.

Public administration as craft

By invoking the language of ‘craft’, the PM&C Capability Review team revived an idea that is well established in the public administration literature. Public administration has been variously characterised as an art, craft or science and often a combination of all three (Raadschelders 2004). For Raadschelders (2011, 143) conceiving of public administration as craft highlights the importance of ‘intuition, tacit knowledge and experiential knowledge’. Like other creative endeavours, he notes that while such traits can be studied, ‘they cannot be transmitted via the usual

pedagogical means'. Rhodes (2014) argues that the old craft skills of traditional public administration remain of paramount importance. What are these and in what ways are they relevant to the challenges confronting the contemporary public service in Australian jurisdictions?

The craft perspective has an applied orientation; it addresses practitioners and is concerned with helping them find the right 'tool' for a given situation (Waldo 1968). Similarly, Goodsell (1992, 247) argues that 'public administration can be viewed as 'the execution of an applied or practical art...'. A public administrator doing his or her job well 'subscribes to certain specific normative ideas, derived from aesthetic theory such as craftsmanship, style, form, respect for materials, and creativity'. He proposes a 'broader concept of the concept of craft to public administration based on four elements: mastery, identity, responsibility and practical learning (Goodsell 1992, 248).

Mastery recognises it is difficult and takes many years of effort to become an expert practitioner, able to demonstrate 'great control over the craft's materials, can do anything with them, can work with speed and agility, can do with ease things that ordinary, less expert craftsmen find difficult or impossible' (Becker 1978, 865). Thus apprenticeship - the accumulation of knowledge and skills and their refinement through practice and experience, is central. Goodsell (1992, 248) argues that 'mastery stands as a monument to the past glorious efforts that, in effect, legitimise the master's status as earned rather than bestowed'. The craftsperson uses their specialist knowledge and skills to produce things that meet others' practical needs. Having demonstrated their mastery of their craft, he or she joins a group distinctive

for its expertise, where relationships develop from mutual interest, shared beliefs and shared norms. 'This combination of hard-earned distinctiveness and mutual collegueship constitutes a kind of natural binding glue between craftspersons working in widely separated places and organisations'.

Goodsell (1992, 248) argues the sense of *identity* an individual derives from their membership of this specialist group constitutes a second element of craft in public administration. It fosters third and related element of craft - a sense of pride in and willingness to accept *responsibility* for their work. Goodsell's final attribute of craft is *practical learning*, which recognises that, much like the PM&C craft, 'traditional craft knowledge is not systematically codified and written down. It is known informally, passed on verbally to apprentices and journeymen over time'. He argues the subtleties of administration can be taught through demonstration, but that they are only learned through direct experience. Goodsell (1992, 249) notes 'this aspect of the artistry of administration gives added respect for the great importance of such individualised devices as the internship, the mentoring relationship and informal dialogue between old hand and newcomer'(Goodsell 1992, 249). His notion of practical learning is consistent with Kane and Patapan's (2006) concept of 'prudence' – the virtue of 'practical wisdom' in public administration.

Rhodes (2014) identifies six 'craft' skills, which he argues can no longer be taken for granted, because they have been diminished by a relentless focus on management under successive waves of public sector reform. For Rhodes (2014) the craft skills are practiced by the most senior public servants – the political-administrators at the head of departments of state. The skills include: counselling, stewardship, practical wisdom, probity, judgement, diplomacy and political nous. He

refutes the primacy of any one set of skills, arguing instead that the craft skills must coexist with the skills of new public management and network governance. What matters is the ability to choose between and manage the mix of skills. According to Rhodes (2014, 22):

At the heart of their craft is the ability to learn from experience and alter the mix of skills to fit both the specific context in which they work, and the person for whom they work.

Bringing ministers in

To date and for the most part, concerns about policy capacity and the quality of policy advice have assumed deficiencies on the supply-side – that they are internal to public service departments and agencies and reflect a lack of skills, responsiveness, or some combination of both. I want to suggest that something is changing; that the tone of the debate is shifting and that increasingly critiques of governance are focused on the demand-side. For a time, the period of minority government from 2010-13 was seen as especially turbulent. Perceptions of that may have moderated somewhat through the experience of the Abbott government's first term.

By 2013, complaints were rife that Australian public administration had reached its nadir. That was the unmistakable impression created by frequent lamentations from business, industry and other stakeholders about the quality of public policy and decision-making. Two key industry groups - the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Committee for Economic Development Australia (CEDA) released reports calling for reforms to 'address a deterioration of good policy

processes and sound governance arrangements...’ (BCA 2013, 91). The Business Council of Australia (BCA) Chief Executive Jennifer Westacott courted controversy when she claimed that Australia’s public service had been irrevocably damaged by short-term thinking, a deterioration of good policy processes and the growing influence of partisan advisers with ‘limited experience and even less expertise’? She launched a broadside at ministers and their staff, accusing them of ‘short-term thinking’ and of having ‘lost sight of the fundamental role of the public service’ (Westacott 2012, 1).

A growing number of analysts, most from outside government, questioned the ability and willingness of Australia’s politics and political institutions to deliver policy reforms of the kind that positioned the nation for relative prosperity and resilience to global shocks (see among many potential sources, Bryant 2014; Kelly 2014; Megalogenis 2012). The CEDA critique was especially significant because it engaged and generation of policy leaders and officials who worked together to deliver long-term reforms and now question the system’s capacity to achieve comparable change (CEDA 2013). The report stressed the importance and long-term benefits to be gained from good policy and deliberative processes, of disciplined routines, of valuing the Cabinet, the Parliament and intergovernmental fora. It emphasised the value for policy and governance of close, cooperative relationships between ministers and public servants.

Like Jennifer Westacott, former Secretary of PM&C, Terry Moran, turned his focus towards ministers. He noted ‘leadership in government’ is essential to achieving ‘any substantial policy reform’, stressing the need for political leaders to be skilled in the ‘arts of governing’. According to Moran (2013, 2), these include:

- being good at political management and communication – which is not always straightforward given the complexities of issues and political structures
- being able to work effectively with the major stakeholder groups who are affected by a reform proposal
- understanding that if [emphasis original] the reforms involve the states and territories – you have to approach them with a degree of respect for their constitutional role; and
- finally, having a very clear idea about what the public service does and what Ministers and their private offices do.

The focus on ministers is unusual, but some argue it is long overdue. Politicians have driven public sector reform efforts, yet they have been conspicuously absent from debates about public sector capacity and performance. Legendary mandarin Sir Arthur Tange noted in his 1981 Garran Oration that:

It is remarkable that the analyses, and the remedies for public service deficiencies, have seldom looked at ministers – what they are, their workloads and habits, their priorities... It is inexplicable that the Royal Commission [into Australian Government Administration (RCAGA)] directed to inquire into the ‘relationship of the Australian Public Service... with Parliament, Ministers and the community...’ specifically relieved itself from any analysis or recommendations on ministerial methods, and largely accepted the idealised textbook model of authority to which public servants may be capable of responding (Tange 1982, 1, 9-10).

Tange argued 'the focus of investigations and recommendations concerning [public sector] reform has been too narrow. Changes recommended have been directed to some parts of a complex living constitutional organism without enough regard to the effect elsewhere in it'. He urged reformers to focus on 'the total fabric and process of government'. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, 181) argue similarly the need to review ministers remaining a 'no-go' zone in debates about public sector reform. In the Australian context, Richard Mulgan (2010) has noted the surprising absence, even marginalisation of ministers in the recent Moran review process.

As well as evading the public sector reforms of the past 40 years, Australian ministers have resisted executive education or professional development, reportedly regarding suggestions it might be appropriate as an affront to their elected status. Ministerial office remains one of the last bastions of the amateur. Politics may be becoming more professional, but this has not translated to formal preparation for becoming a minister. Although better educated and generally possessing more political experience, it is arguable contemporary Australian ministers are less well prepared to discharge their ministerial duties than their predecessors, who were older, were drawn from more diverse occupational backgrounds, career and life experiences and spent longer in parliament before their first appointment. Ministers and ministerial staffers do most of their learning on the job. Lacking development pathways and institutional memory, their preparation draws on narratives and storytelling (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014a). It involves consulting colleagues and peers in their personal and professional networks, reading political biographies and drawing lessons from mentors and political heroes here and overseas (Tiernan and Weller 2010).

Conclusion

As Australia faces increasingly complex policy and governance challenges, it is worth considering whether the next phase of public sector reform should take as its central concern how the craft of public administration is practiced by all parties to the 'governing marriage' – ministers, their staff and career officials. We might contemplate career paths and trajectories; the socialisation and acculturation practitioners have to the task of advice and decision-making. A craft perspective draws our attention to the importance of mastery and of apprenticeship in developing and refining the repertoire of necessary skills and experience; of professional identity; of responsibility and of practical wisdom in promoting good governance, adaptability and that most important of capacities: the ability and willingness to learn from experience.

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ⁱ For a review of the international literature and government efforts to build policy capacity and improve the quality of advice, see Tiernan (2011, 335-38)