

# Foreword

Good policy, transparency of decision-making and accountability for results are key foundations on which the community at large might reasonably expect government to be built and delivered. This should come together through sound public sector governance accompanied by demonstration of able custodianship of community resources and respectful ministerial and parliamentary behaviour. Nonetheless, while political parties in opposition see these foundations as a good idea, this ideal slips out of sight once they come into office.

On any reasonable comparison with private sector governance, the public sector lags a long way behind – by perhaps an order of magnitude – and, somewhat ironically, well behind the government’s own regulatory standards set for private sector governance. The government’s own performance is sliding, with a public sector landscape dominated by growing political and administrative fragmentation and regulatory capture.

This seems to be part of a race to the bottom, given the accumulating evidence of private sector and not-for-profit institutional and governance failure (for example, banks and financial services, religious institutions and the aged-care sector). The combined evidence of institutional failure across all major sectors indicates a broad-based downward moral spiral that is desperately in need of a circuit breaker.

Some three years ago and following some initial academic research, I decided to build on my previous involvement with the public sector and write a book examining issues surrounding government accountability and performance in Australia. As such, this book presents a determinedly public service perspective on the challenges of good government, seeing the public service both as a (desirably) well-managed organisation in its own right and an important instrument of public policy.

The content of this book is focused on the role of the public service in addressing the difficult project of establishing and maintaining good government, beginning with a discussion of the key shortcomings of government today, then viewing the role of the public service in three parts – its present role, the role prescribed in the *Public Service Act 1999*, and the role it *could* play in the public interest. It is not a book about politics or government, but much of the detailed discussion revolves around the nature of the interface between the political and administrative arms of government, which is a necessary tent of any model of public administration. The aim in writing this book was to put forward a clear alternative to the destructive path of subordination and replacement of the public service that is inherent in the present path of government today.

The discussion of the role that the public service might play in the public interest draws heavily on private sector management literature – perhaps ironically given the criticism that can be levelled at the application of private sector management reforms to the public sector over the last 30 or so years. The resolution of this apparent difficulty for the reader can be found in an accompanying discussion of the merit of these ‘managerialist’ reforms, their selective nature, the accompanying motivation, the success of their implementation and their impacts. The book is essentially an Australian case study but it grapples with problems that are global in origin. This is a book written *to* policy leaders and public servants in Australia, and *for* the Australian public. Its simple message is that the public service has lost touch with the community it should serve and needs to be re-imagined as a custodian of the public interest. Seven prime ministers in the last 10 years is a ready starting point in making this case.

The focus and content of this book has been heavily shaped by a lengthy involvement with government. I joined the Victorian Public Service in 1985 after a decade with Shell Australia, and the apparent management chaos I observed contrasted heavily with the order of a well-managed and led Shell Australia. Contrary to textbook views, self-interest motivates most individuals in the political and bureaucratic system, no less so than with Shell. In the case of the latter, this pursuit was clearly channelled into a framework of fulfilment of corporate goals.

My interest in public sector management was piqued in 1992 by the introduction of the New Public Management (NPM) reforms to the Victorian public sector by an incoming Liberal–Country Party government and the subsequent attempts a decade or so later by

a Labor government to undo some of the damage. This interest has also been shaped by earlier academic study of corporate behaviour and, in particular, in organisational management of relationships with the external environment. Notions of organisational strategy, structure and adjustment to change figure prominently in what follows.

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1 Facts and figures in this book were accurate at the time of writing. However, circumstances change; where possible, attempts have been made to ensure data is up-to-date.

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