

Introduction

Andrew Podger and John Wanna

Secretaries of government departments in Australia are the bureaucratic leaders of their generation. They are ambitious, highly-talented executives who have risen to the very pinnacle of their chosen vocation – public service to the Australian nation – usually after having spent most, if not all, of their professional careers dedicated to the public service. They serve governments as their top advisers and in policy terms are often some of the most important decision-makers in the country.

As bureaucratic leaders they also sit atop a very large pyramid. At any point in time no more than twenty individuals hold these esteemed positions out of a federal public service of some 165,000 employees, some 245,000 in Commonwealth government employment, and a population of around 22 million. The departments they run are some of the largest organisations in society, much larger in terms of the number of employees and number of functions than their equivalents in the private or non-government sectors.

In this collection we have assembled the valedictory speeches from a departing echelon of secretaries (and one or two other equivalent agency heads) who left the Australian Public Service between 2004 and 2011. Over this period of time, among the Canberra mandarinates, it became accepted and, indeed, expected that departing secretaries and heads of significant agencies would present a valedictory address given to their peers at some public farewell function. The first two in this collection of speeches were initiated by the secretaries themselves and given at functions organised by their agencies. Perhaps because of their substance, or their notoriety, it was decided in late 2005 to formalise the process with the Australian Public Service Commission acting as host and organiser (records of around seven of these ten formal valedictories were internally published by the APSC between 2005 and 2010).

Peter Shergold, then Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, had read the valedictory address given in July 2005 by the head of the UK civil service, Sir Andrew Turnbull, and was impressed and believed we in Australia should do something similar. A number of departing secretaries chose not to deliver a valedictory at the time, or felt uncomfortable proffering commentary on the eve of their departure, or were just too busy with other things to devote the necessary time to the speech. We invited each of these to make a contribution to our compilation, albeit sometime after their departure.

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Most agreed, so that the sixteen former secretaries (13 men and three women) in this collection include most who left the APS over this period. On our count we are still missing four who ceased to be a secretary in this period.

The speeches roam across the terrain chosen by the speaker. There was no set format or template that had to be followed. The content and robustness of the speeches was entirely up to the presenter either at the time of their departure or in response to our invitation. Accordingly, they contain reflections, commentaries, occasional fond memories or key turning-points in their careers, critiques of changes that have occurred or trends they feel are not for the best, and some pay particular attention to the remaining challenges their successors, the public administrators of tomorrow, will face. Some discuss how they manage their private and public lives, while others steer clear of this and focus on public administration more decisively.

Significantly, most of these former secretaries started their working lives as graduates in agencies with strong internal cultures emphasising rigorous training, analysis and making a difference. When they started out they were one of many hopefuls aspiring to leadership positions in national administration. Of course, each year thousands start out on a public service career path; of these no doubt many have ambitions to climb up the ladder, but few can ever reach the top. Gradually each intake is whittled down by departures, transfers, resignations, even illness or incapacity; some leave the public service due to a loss of interest or commitment, perhaps because they are unsuited in temperament, or are insufficiently talented or motivated.

The original intakes are gradually narrowed at senior levels until only the exceptionally talented stayers remain. In most cases secretaries are internal appointments with considerable experience, selected by invitation rather than by outside advertisement. Most were clearly Canberra insiders who had spent their careers in the national capital in Commonwealth bodies, but some were total outsiders, coming from public sector experience in the states. So, not only are these gifted practitioners the most capable of their generation, they are also the survivors and victors of the 'greasy pole' inside government that rubs administration against politics. If it is too much to claim that they actually embody the state, they certainly occupy the fulcrum between government and the community, and between our political and administrative systems.

Some of the former secretaries contributing to this collection managed to hold the office for around a decade serving multiple governments and working with various ministers; others served a much shorter term perhaps with just one minister in one government. Three served as the Australian Public Service Commissioner besides heading departments and agencies (Peter Shergold, Andrew Podger and Lynelle Briggs). As a group of executives their trajectories differ according to the contingencies and circumstances they faced. Most left

office at their choosing, announcing their intention of resigning perhaps to retire or to take up some other career or job offer. A few felt pushed from their posts and were terminated before they would themselves have chosen to go. Some have gone on to enjoy glittering careers in other professional spheres after their stint as secretary; most are still making a contribution in the broader public interest; a very few simply retired after they left the job. One or two have begun (or continued) to write, making public contributions to public administration or policy analysis and deliberation; policy and administrative reviews, or to teaching and training.

As a group of relatively experienced secretaries, they fulfilled many roles depending on circumstance and the requirements of the government of the day. Included in our group were former central agency coordinators and fix-it operatives; some had earned a reputation as strategic policy advisers who had progressed by intellectual prowess, others headed large and complex policy portfolios, some ran delivery agencies or specialist functional units. At least ten straddled both line and central agency responsibilities in their time as public service leaders, employing the lessons and experiences from one set of functions to the other.

Interestingly for students of public administration, their backgrounds are diverse and contrasting. Unlike in some other countries (and particularly the UK and France) there is no natural elite or aristocratic cadre who occupy the posts almost by entitlement or social standing and who have been schooled and socialised through elite tertiary institutions such as Oxbridge or studied at the *Grandes Écoles*. By contrast, Australian secretaries come from all walks of life: some of their families were engaged in timber-gathering, ran share farms or country banks; one's father was a politician, others' fathers include a local doctor, an accountant and a state government engineer; some had mothers who had professional careers of their own in teaching or health services, while others' mothers played a more traditional role. Many came from small towns or rural backgrounds. They earned scholarships to their local universities often before going on to undertake higher degrees, with some choosing to study overseas. Despite this diversity, they are mostly men with an English-speaking background, and only one had a disability.

As these speeches illustrate, these secretaries are also human beings coping with the pressures of managing careers and personal lives. They try to manage work-family balances despite the onerous demands of the job. At times in their careers they were sometimes fortunate, lucky, exasperated, disappointed, proud of their achievements, worried things are getting away from them or becoming harder to manage. Each one has a different personality and took different approaches to crafting their reflections in the speeches.

So what do they tell us about the nature of public service and government administration, about leading public institutions, and about the state of public policy more generally? From the outset it is clear that there is no uniform message, no single narrative levelled either in praise or in criticism, other than pride in the public service and strong belief in the contribution it makes to the Australian community. They have their own personal 'takes' on how the public service looks to them, on its performance and on the challenges confronting public administration into the future. Most spend some time looking back, reflecting on the extent of change that has occurred over the length of their careers; but equally importantly they look forward, anticipating future policy dilemmas and capacity challenges.

Several strongly dispute the notion that there was ever a 'golden age' of the APS from which some subsequent fall from grace has occurred. Roger Beale notes in his 2004 speech that for every great man of the past there were others holding back reform, and that 'those great men of the post-war public service were also great haters and great players of time-wasting, self-indulgent bureaucratic games'. 'The system had to change – and it did', he says. Others also are comfortable with the influential speech given by Peter Shergold (see AJPA 63(4) 2004) when he was Secretary of PM&C originally entitled 'Once was Camelot in Canberra?', which poured scorn on the 'golden age' affliction. Ric Smith and David Borthwick refer to the more collegiate approach in the modern era. But equally secretaries are not complacent and consider it essential (and prudent) to enhance the critical capacities of the public service and its abilities to analytically scrutinise or challenge ideas inside government in the pursuit of good public policy. They are also conscious of increased accountabilities applying to today's secretaries that were far less onerous for their predecessors prior to the 1970s. According to these more recent secretaries, their distant predecessors had an easier set of tasks to perform and accountabilities to meet, and a more leisurely pace at which to do it.

There is a general agreement about the important challenge of managing the relationship with ministers, making it work, finding ways to ensure ministers get the advice they need to hear. Ministers are important partners and gatekeepers in their public service endeavours – whether identifying priorities, providing policy advice, appraising risk, or delivering services to the public. Ministers bring the all-important political dimension to the table without which many decisions or actions would not be taken. As politicians they may be a little distant or wary, constantly time-poor and at times motivated by different concerns, but finding ways to work with ministers is crucial to the secretary's own performance and that of their agency. Shergold highlights the nuances of the relationship, observing how closely he worked with each of his ministers: 'yet not one minister was my friend'.

Unlike many in the general populace, secretaries almost universally have a high level of respect for ministers and the roles they perform. But managing the minister in a constantly changing political environment is not easy and requires a constant prudential balance; and these former secretaries display some divergence of views about the balance between being responsive to the political realm (the minister and cabinet) and the degree of independence needed to present alternatives, cautions or even warnings to gung-ho ministers. In his 2005 valedictory Andrew Podger writes: 'I doubt there are many today who would argue that the APS needs to shift the balance further towards responsiveness'. On the other hand, Michael L'Estrange, writing in 2011, well after the public debate between Podger and Shergold over secretary employment arrangements, states: 'I share Peter Shergold's view that the provision of frank and sometimes unwelcome advice by secretaries to ministers is a question of character, not of contract'.

Some secretaries highlight the increasing numbers of ministerial advisers and the roles they are charged to undertake in the minister's name, and the impact this has on relationships with ministers. Ric Smith notes that 'we now have a whole new layer or level of government'. Like others, Smith comments about this trend not with any sense of antagonism or nostalgia for the day when advisers were not around, but expresses concern about the impact on the respective accountabilities of ministers and secretaries. Patricia Scott writing in 2011 says there has been real progress in clarifying the role of ministerial advisers since their code of conduct was introduced, but remains concerned about 'the all-too-common experience of the adviser that is exclusively a political operative with little policy experience, overflowing confidence in their ability to discern policy on the basis of a quick Google search and an unrelenting focus on the short-term political imperatives'. She prefers having senior people with both policy expertise and the confidence of the minister. She also advocates having senior departmental officers playing key roles in ministerial offices.

Several secretaries highlight the importance of longer-term strategic policy analysis and advice (perhaps even contingency planning and strategic thinking), and a focus on the public interest notwithstanding the role of ministers to determine policy. David Borthwick speaks about advising on policy 'as if for a thousand years', and suggests some measures to address the pressures from increasingly savvy specific interest groups and governments being more reactive to the intense pressure of the 24-hour news cycle. He argues that 'today there is a much stronger focus on developing public policy that is genuinely in the national interest and, consequently, there is a much stronger focus on working together'.

A few highlight particular policy fields and exhort continued effort and analysis. Ken Henry focuses on the central responsibility of economic management and on

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the challenges facing governments in enhancing national economic wellbeing. Instead of reflecting back on his own career, he chooses to 'look ahead at the economic landscape upon which future Treasury secretaries will be developing policy advice'. Mark Sullivan calls for continued boldness in addressing Indigenous disadvantage, noting the need to get the support of Aboriginal community leaders and to remember the 'wonderful positives that come from embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and practice'.

While most of these former secretaries did not mention much about their relations with the Prime Minister, or prime ministerial styles – which varied substantially from Keating to Howard, to Rudd to Gillard – several express concern about weakening cabinet processes and moves towards presidential styles of government. Several would also like to see further improvements to collegiality across government (between executives from different agencies and between different agencies) and strengthening of the links with the coordinating agencies at the centre to better coordinate and integrated whole-of-government policy responses.

Not surprisingly, many of the former APS leaders highlight the management issues and the importance of implementation, some providing considerable detail on specific management challenges including IT management, performance pay, recruitment and development. Lynelle Briggs highlights the scale of the change management task facing those in the Human Services portfolio, while Dennis Trewin describes the changing world faced by one of our oldest agencies, the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Given that management is one of the essential functions of a secretary, it is perhaps puzzling that more of these former secretaries did not say more about management or mention management dilemmas at all. Allan Hawke is an exception, using his essay to take a firm stand against performance pay which was the order of the day when he was a secretary, citing a wide range of evidence in support of his argument. While Hawke notes his failure to win the argument against the orthodoxy in the early 2000s, no-one here argues for performance pay (though Michael L'Estrange considers that it 'has never fulfilled the best hopes of its champions or the worst fears of its detractors').

Given the era in which they spent their senior careers (the 1990s), most are conscious of the tension between consolidation or centralisation and decentralisation or devolution. There is a divergence of views about the merits of devolution, Peter Shergold perhaps reflecting the majority view worrying that it may have gone too far while Peter Boxall extolling its virtues and doubting the merits of some of the more recent attempts at re-centralisation.

Few refer to their relations with the Parliament, although the occasional grilling particularly from senators at Senate Estimates hearings is certainly burnt into

their consciousness. The theatre of parliament is a forum in which their ministers play, and something to be wary about, but not sufficiently contentious or onerous for secretaries to warrant much comment in these speeches. Ken Matthews asks if APS leaders have 'become [too] docile and unassertive' in Senate Estimates and other forums, both public and private. Most believe in informing parliament genuinely about what is being undertaken; although many seem to express a preference for a greater level of independence from the parliamentary realm than they are granted. But this view is not universal and traditionalists remain comfortable with being ultimately accountable to parliament conventions.

Of increasingly more importance to today's leaders are relations with the public and of good two-way communication. These external relations are highlighted in several speeches, partly out of concerns to improve the effectiveness of policy implementation but also to advance the agenda for what is now more described as 'citizen-centred services' or 'citizen engagement'. Briggs believes a 'transformational change' is taking place in the way public services are delivered, based on an 'outside-in' approach instead of 'the more traditional internally driven 'tell you' model', describing the work she led in Human Services. Trewin emphasises the growing importance to the ABS of user engagement to handle the growth in demand and the dramatic changes in the way users access statistics.

Similarly, the difficulties in managing media relations are frequently identified as an important part of the job of a secretary (and a risk to be managed because of the potential downsides of negative coverage). Matthews applauds Ken Henry's regular public economic and reform contributions, saying senior public servants 'have a responsibility to be more active on the conference circuit'. L'Estrange seems more circumspect; while referring to the personal confidences that are entered into by secretaries which need to 'be respected in both the short and longer term', he says 'this ongoing responsibility is of a different order to that applying to elected decision-makers'. The two are referring to different issues, of course, but one perhaps reflects a more traditional approach inclined to public service anonymity while the other reflects a desire for more open public engagement. Podger raises another aspect of this difficult issue in his valedictory of 2005, suggesting that constraints on public access to information and controls on government communications may not reflect the public interest but partisan interests.

Relations between the Commonwealth and state or territory governments are highlighted directly by two contributors and indirectly by others. Borthwick says the trend towards greater control by the Commonwealth is unlikely to be reversed. 'The Commonwealth is absolutely capable of developing strategies for managing complex projects at a local level, and delivering services across Australia which cater to the different needs of different communities', he argues, while stating that 'the acquisition of new responsibilities does bring with it new challenges'. Matthews focuses on the 'new paradigm' of priority for regional Australia highlighting

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challenges for ‘the city-based Australian Public Service’. *Promoting the APS Values* is not mentioned directly by many, but there is frequent reference to the critical role of the public service, reflected in the titles chosen by Shergold (‘In the national interest’) and Borthwick (‘As if for a thousand years...’). These secretaries all took their APS leadership responsibilities seriously.

Finally, and naturally enough, the vagaries of negotiating personal career paths and development are mentioned by nearly all. They recount how at certain junctures significant mentors were important to their careers and the choices they thereafter made; who recruited them for significant jobs or who they followed into challenging managerial or policy roles; and who helped shape their career path. Much of this genuflection is highly personal and included by way of public appreciation. In giving their valedictory, speakers would typically cite lists of names of the many with whom they worked, or who helped their careers along, but who would not be familiar to today’s readership. We have taken the liberty of editing out much of this personalised expression of gratitude from the publication. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the similarities of patterns in their progression through the ranks and through different policy and organisational challenges. There was once some commonality to the making of a secretary.

Yet as L’Estrange predicts, probably accurately, the career paths of secretaries in the future are likely to be much more varied and dissimilar in their composition and experiences – a development he applauds. Robert Cornall represents one of those with a more varied career path including both private sector and state government experience. In identifying the lessons he learned in the APS after working for the Victorian government, he makes the interesting point that it ‘was like moving from the under 15s to the seniors over night’. The adjustment was not just to the size and scale of the Commonwealth but also to the breadth of responsibilities including the international dimension. While the males often thanked spouses, partners and families for their support, as Joanna Hewitt mentions, it is often still very difficult for women in relationships where both partners occupy senior professional appointments to deal with the work-family balance over time, especially when significant distance separates the family.

These speeches provide an important contribution to understanding the challenges of public administration in the modern era as seen from the top of the service. There are differences of opinion on some issues, partly reflecting the different times when the speeches were made, but also reflecting some healthy debates within the APS that deserve more public exposure. The different aspects of the responsibilities of secretaries that these former mandarins decided to focus upon also reflect the breadth of the challenges in the job. All are thoughtful, and all demonstrate a commitment to the role of the APS and a concern to see its capability to be able contribute to the Australian community continue and grow.