

Foreword

Dr Kathy MacDermott's monograph sets out a series of controversial arguments that challenge some widely and strongly held views.

Many, like me, continue to regard the New Public Management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s in Australia as groundbreaking, demonstrating how the public sector can deliver efficient and effective services in an internationally competitive economy. Many also of my vintage and older continue to view favourably the Coombs Royal Commission's other two emphases on responsiveness to the elected government and community participation in government, reinforcing democratic principles and breaking down the hegemony of the public service. And there are strong adherents of the more recent emphasis on performance management and workplace reform.

MacDermott does not oppose these reforms, but questions how some have been applied in practice and how they have cumulatively re-positioned public servants and their relationship with the political arm of government. In doing so, some leaders of the reforms will no doubt feel somewhat uncomfortable about aspects of MacDermott's analysis.

This monograph is important. It does not suggest turning back the clock, but seeks reconsideration of some of the effects of the reforms of the last 25 years. Have some gone too far? Have we lost sight of the idealistic aspirations behind some of the reforms? Have there been unintended consequences from some initiatives? Have we let the rhetoric run away from the reality?

Importantly, MacDermott looks at the reforms from the perspective of public servants down the line, not just departmental secretaries. What is the context in which they now operate and what behaviours do they believe the system expects of them today? In particular, are they encouraged to be responsive to the point where they compromise their duty to be apolitical and impartial and concerned for the public interest?

Some of the challenges MacDermott identifies are:

- the extent to which contestability of policy advice is improving the contest for ideas or enhancing the ability of governments to find the advice they want;
- the extent to which performance management is improving organisational performance or reinforcing pressure to conform;
- the extent to which devolution has enhanced flexibility to deliver better results or has involved a trade-off of policy influence for managerial control, with public servants subject to closer direction by both managers and by ministerial advisers and ministers;

- the extent to which workforce reforms in the public sector have increased flexibility and enhanced employees' capacity to identify with and contribute to organisational objectives, or have disempowered employees, discouraged teamwork and reduced innovation and professional autonomy;
- the extent to which outsourcing has improved efficiency and effectiveness through competition or has undermined altruism and concern for the public interest both within the public service and amongst the non-government sector.

I do not agree with all of MacDermott's conclusions, although I know of real instances that are consistent with almost all of her hypothetical cases and I know well that the APS Commission survey data confirm widespread unease amongst public servants. In a few cases, however, I think that unease is just misplaced; in other cases, there is indeed supporting evidence reinforcing the need to revisit current practice, for example in performance management and workplace relations.

More generally, MacDermott's plea for a firmer focus on public value strikes a chord with me. Public servants do want to serve the elected government, but they want to be recognised by government and the public for their contribution to the public interest by their professionalism. The opportunity to serve the public remains the greatest attraction to join the public service, and the greatest motivator to perform. If not managed appropriately some of the reforms, notwithstanding their intrinsic merits, do present a danger of undermining this fundamental value which drives the public service.

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