Foreword

Whistleblowing, or the public interest reporting of wrongdoing by public officials, is a key means for identifying and rectifying wrongdoing in the public sector. The way that whistleblowers are managed is a vital issue—for the individuals and organisations involved and for public accountability and integrity more generally.

Since 2005, the national research project ‘Whistling While They Work: Enhancing the theory and practice of internal witness management in the Australian public sector’ has investigated this vital process. It is the first comprehensive project of its kind in Australia. Through the participation of numerous partners across many Australian jurisdictions, the project has collected levels of data that also makes it, per capita, the most comprehensive empirical study of whistleblowing conducted worldwide.

This book constitutes the first of two major reports from the project, setting out the lessons from this research. While the findings expressed are those of the authors, the data they report and the issues they highlight provide important new departure points for debate about how whistleblowing can be better managed.

The Whistling While They Work project focused on the less sensational and more practical aspects of how public interest whistleblowing should be managed. The objectives of the project include the development of new standards for internal disclosure procedures in public sector integrity systems; fostering improved coordination between public agencies and integrity bodies in the handling and oversight of disclosures; and supporting improved internal witness management strategies in a range of different types of public sector organisations.

The project has produced a comprehensive picture of the issues faced by those involved in reporting wrongdoing and managing the response. This picture highlights the strengths and weaknesses of current systems. A full cross-section of systems is covered—with data based on agency statistics, the experience of whistleblowers, the views of managers, the assessments of ‘case-handlers’ involved in managing whistleblowing and the perceptions and experiences of public officials generally, including many who have not seen wrongdoing and many who have seen it, but not reported it.

The research highlights the factors that make the facilitation and management of public interest disclosures so challenging and complex. Findings are made that will help public sector managers improve existing processes, at an individual, organisational and jurisdictional level. The findings range from the steps to be taken by managers to assess the risk of reprisal against a person who has made a disclosure to the need for stronger mechanisms to support staff members who
report wrongdoing, and the legislative reforms needed to underpin these processes.

A second report from the Whistling While They Work project will describe in more detail the ‘internal witness management systems’ of a cross-section of the 304 public agencies studied in this project. The second report will contain new model procedures for managing whistleblowing and provide practical insights on encouraging and managing public interest disclosures.

We congratulate the research team for assembling a rich body of information on current practice in Australia for managing public interest whistleblowing. We also thank the large number of public sector agencies and public employees who participated in the research. The picture presented in this report would be less complete, and the findings less compelling, without their participation and support.

The research collected in this book provides an excellent platform for review and reform. The challenge now lies with public sector agencies, managers and integrity and oversight agencies to build on these research findings to establish—or, where established, improve—our nation’s systems for managing public interest whistleblowing.

Professor John McMillan, Commonwealth Ombudsman

Bruce Barbour, NSW Ombudsman

Robert Needham, Chairperson, Crime and Misconduct Commission (Queensland)
Foreword

David Bevan, Queensland Ombudsman

James Purtill, Public Service Commissioner (Queensland)

Dr Ruth Shean, Commissioner for Public Sector Standards (Western Australia)

The Hon L W Roberts-Smith RFD QC, Commissioner, Corruption and Crime Commission (Western Australia)

Chris Field, Ombudsman, Western Australia