
Where to for the public sector and public sector education?

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Speech

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It's appropriate on a night such as tonight to reflect upon what has been happening in public administration over the last twenty-one years and then to ask "can we make sense of it all?" So too should we ask "what does it all mean for the public service and public sector education?"

I'm pleased to be able to do this because I was involved directly, firstly in local government (1983 to 1986) and then in state government (1986 to 2006). Many of the developments I witnessed firsthand, and in some cases I was privileged to be the instigator of reform as a Minister and the as Premier.

THE EIGHT CHANGES THAT DEFINE GOVERNMENT TODAY

Let me start with the process of policy-making in government. Here we have seen a significant centralisation of power in central agencies including the upgraded Department of Premier and Cabinet and Leaders' Offices. Policy development is by and large centrally driven and co-ordinated under the watchful eye of the Premier and his or her advisors and officials.

Linked to this has been an increase in the power and authority of the elected relative to non-elected arms of government. Two factors have been at play here - appointment and dismissal of heads of department by governments and an expansion in the role of ministerial advisers, particularly media advisers.

Thirdly state governments have been active in the arena of state strategic plans which set objectives, define success and prioritise delivery towards those ends. All of this is explicit and upfront - and often involves key stakeholders and the general public being incorporated into the planning, implementation and evaluation of the plans.

Indeed the incorporation of the community in many aspects of modern government - through consultation or democratic engagement - represents a fourth element. It's a recognition that governments can't know it all and in many cases are not in a position to do it all without community participation.

Fifthly we have witnessed the development of a "commissioning" framework for service delivery and this has meant a wider range of service providers - not-for-profit and private - as well as government. Purchasing and provision have been separated - even when the public sector is the chosen mechanism for delivery.

Sixthly - and connected to commissioning - we have seen the emergence of specific and detailed indicators of performance. Indeed performance management is now operating not just for organisations within and supplying to government but also for individuals and not just in connection with efficiency and effectiveness but also in relation to ethical behaviour as defined by the public interest.

Seventhly, government has become information hungry even if not as information rich as we would wish. The various agencies of accountability have been given wide powers to investigate and to their number we have added Corruption Commissions. As well today we see clients and customers of government services being widely consulted about service relevance and quality.

Finally, we have seen a drive to centralize and better co-ordinate the delivery of services to government, be they human resource management, information management or financial services more generally. Not unrelated to this has been the incorporation of new technology into the work of government. The mantra is shared services and the objective is lower cost services for government.

IS THERE A THEME?

What we see at work here are a range of objectives, some of which sit uneasily with others - more centralisation in policy but more devolution in delivery, greater political control over administration but unchanged expectations about what public servants should achieve, more consistency and standardisation of services delivered to government but more diversity in service delivery for the community, more focus on outcomes but at the same time tighter controls over inputs and outputs, and more need for information from and about government at the same time as governments have an increased need to control its use and interpretation in a media-saturated world.

Critics would say the system that has emerged is too politicised and despite the best of intentions incapable of achieving good outcomes. Supporters say it has been a good thing to clip the wings of the bureaucracy - and the Sir Humphreys within its agencies - and put more performance requirements around the individuals and organizations working within government.

However, let me put aside the question of politicisation and consider the other parts of the system that has emerged. Following John Benington I would call it "networked community governance". What's interesting about it is that it incorporates elements of traditional and new public management where they are relevant and allows for a further step to be taken in the form of strategic plans for the government as a whole. It's genuinely a case of "mix" and "match", a characteristic that is highly suitable to today's social and economic environment.

The creation of an across government strategic plan does a number of things. Firstly it brings a sense of purpose and clear priorities to government. This allows governments to communicate more clearly with their electors and with their own public service.

Secondly, it creates the potential to involve the public in both the formation and implementation of the plan, thus helping to break down the trust deficit between government and the people, about which much has been said.

Most importantly, however, state plans do lead to the need to have independent monitoring and evaluation at the whole-of-government and whole-of-society levels. This is not an activity that

can be easily delivered but if done well it can be of great assistance not just in providing information about performance to the public but also in assisting governments to improve their performance. Such information needs to be relevant, accurate and timely if it is to be useful.

It's true of course that politics isn't just a battle over "the evidence". Beliefs are involved as well and even if the "evidence" indicates failure or less than adequate results politicians may still persist with a policy or program. "It's too soon to judge" might be their response or they might say "the policy hasn't been given the support it needs to work". It might also be a case of "values" and their application independent of the actual results which emerge, illicit drug policy being an example.

However, what all of this tells us is that the production of evidence forces debate even if it can't resolve the differences between the protagonists. It is this very fact that leads some - if not most politicians to be wary of strategic plans as an organising principle.

It's not just that they worry about a loss of "flexibility" in the face of "events" but that they worry about the accountability implications of "open government" in a merciless world.

Naturally they want to be in a position to put their best face forward. Those of you with a more cynical disposition might call it "spin".

In many and important ways governments have opened themselves up to a greater scrutiny from parliament, agencies of accountability and the media. However, it's not a process that is welcomed by all and doctrines like parliamentary privilege, ministerial responsibility, cabinet confidentiality and commercial-in-confidence are still alive and well. Even though these doctrines come into play on specific issues rather than whole-of-government and whole-of-society outcomes they can be relevant when seeking answers to the question of why things go wrong - or indeed why they don't go wrong.

In many ways though it is the fear of governments that planning restricts their "options" that is most damaging to the cause of strategic planning. At its most extreme form it leads to a division between leaders of conviction and mere opportunists. More often it is a case of "too much strategy" and "too little politics" not one or the other. "Why", ask the politicians, "should we stick with a strategy-even if it is evidence-based and sanctioned by democratic engagement-if the world around us is changing and the media is at our throats?"

It's true, of course, that strategic planning doesn't preclude agility around the edges and nor does it mean that ideology is out of bounds. Indeed there can be "right", "left" or "green" versions of a state plan. So too can governments use a plan to enter new and unresolved policy territory. Indeed despite the claims that strategic planning and open government leads to "too much accountability of the trivial sort" and "too little flexibility of the substantial sort" it is surely a better way to govern than "poll-driven and short-term events management".

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE

This takes me to the role of the public service. Not only do they have an obligation to support the government of the day - a democratic necessity - but they have a duty to protect and promote the public interest which incorporates the future as well as the present, the environment as well as the economy, minorities as well as majorities and good ethics as well as effectiveness. They have to speak "truth to power". This means...

"I'm sorry Minister but you can't do that" "Minister, you can't ask me to do that!"

"I'm sorry Minister but have you really considered all aspects of this problem and what your policy will bring?"

This is not just an expectation it is a duty and when it is not done and the accountability agencies come into the picture it will be the public servant as well as the politician who finds himself or herself in the dock under cross examination.

The public service may have less authority and less power but the law has not given them diminished responsibilities. Not does the government necessarily give them the resources - financial, human and technological - needed to achieve the results being sought. Indeed sometimes they are asked to achieve more with less, usually if not always, an impossible task.

What all this tells me is that the public service needs to be vitally interested in the capacity of its workforce and have some independent research capacity in connection with what it does. Professional development and research aren't just important for individual agencies but also for the sector as a whole.

Think of it this way - who else has an interest in what we know to be the requirements for good government? Politicians should be but it can't be guaranteed. Universities (and other research institutions) should be but we can't guarantee they will have the insights necessary to ensure relevance to the tasks at hand.

The Public Service needs its true believers and its practitioners and its work can't just be a case of "doing" as important as that is. It must also be a case of "thinking", "researching", "educating" and "advising". It all works best of course when politicians understand and support these activities.

Hopefully, it's clear from what I've said that our education and training curricula will have to adjust to the new realities about which I've spoken. Up-to-date knowledge about performance management (and its strengths and weaknesses), joined-up government, commissioning of services, engaging the community, managing information and its provision and shared services will all be important. But will that be enough?

The situation now faced by the service means that political awareness and political skills are also very important. It's not just that senior officials face a complex political environment above them but that they are increasingly part of complex relationships with business and the community. Put simply they can't ignore the questions associated with power and influence - and how they are won and lost.

What this means as well is that the question of personal strengths and weaknesses has also to be put on the table. Not everyone will have the strengths needed to be a leader and not all leaders will have the full range of strengths required. Self-awareness is important as is education in and around issues like listening and communicating, negotiating and influencing and building alignment and alliances.

I say all of this because we live in an era that has exhibited a dangerous tendency to under-emphasise and denigrate the role of the public service. It's not a bad thing that there is now more contestability but it would be if the infrastructure of the state was seriously weakened. Even advocates for a minimalist state would be foolish to deny this. It needs to be defended and that won't just be the responsibility of the politicians but also if the public service itself.

The ball is in your court and I trust you will return it in style and with good effect!