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# The Case for Public Service

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Speech

JJC Bradfield Lecture at St Andrew's College, University of Sydney

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It would certainly not be an understatement to say that we live in challenging times. Nor would it be an exaggeration to say that we live in a time of uncertainty and confusion. Change is in the air but we aren't sure about where it is going to take us.

Let me start with some of the challenges. Climate change, arguably the greatest moral challenge of our times, has the potential to undermine livelihoods and disrupt economies. Our capitalist economies are struggling with the sins of their financial managers and the complacency of their regulators. Without China and India it would be an even sorer picture. Religiously inspired terrorists have had their wings clipped but not their ardour dampened. Even with a much-reduced level of activity they have the potential to sow the seeds of mistrust in societies already uncomfortable with pluralism. Note too the persistence of grinding poverty in many parts of the world.

For the poor and marginalised extremism may offer the only hope.

We assume economic growth but aren't so sure whether the future will be as productive as the past. In countries like ours the population is ageing and the costs of production are rising. Some commentators even say the advanced industrial democracies are moving from an "age of abundance" to an "age of austerity".

In all of this, of course, Australia is still the "lucky country". We are resource rich and China in particular is hungry for our resources. For the last two decades the Commonwealth and the States have managed their finances prudently thus allowing for fiscal stimulus in times of need. This being said, productivity remains an issue as does the persistence of social and economic disadvantage, particular in our indigenous communities. Our natural environment too needs more care and attention.

Just at the time when we need strong leadership to address these issues we find ourselves with a hung Parliament. In itself that may not be a bad thing especially when it comes to political and parliamentary reform but it will certainly put a break on economic reform. In a globalised world it is dangerous to flirt with populism and play around with economic realities. Sustainability doesn't mean ignoring the economy but rather incorporating into a bigger picture that involves our social relationships and our environment as well.

This is a time that requires serious thought about Australia, its role in the world and its institutions and priorities. We need a reform agenda for the times and the political and

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bureaucratic capacity to back it up. This takes me to the often-maligned professions of politics and public service.

#### ABOUT POLITICS ...

About politics I will say little tonight except that it will be -as it always is -the crucial variable in any change agenda. It is both a means and an end. It can help us move forward or it can drag us backwards. It provides a way of putting issues on the table and resolving the inevitable conflicts that emerge over how to handle them. By pre-supposing and requiring freedom it is also an end in itself. On the other side of the ledger are its pollutants such as populism, fundamentalism and fanaticism. So too conservatism. And here I don't mean the conservatism represented by care and attention to detail, what we might call political prudence, but conservatism represented by the pursuit of risk-free politics. This is a politics dominated by what is to be avoided rather than what is to be done. It diminishes our expectations to the point at which fear replaces hope.

At its best, then, politics is about the future as well as the present, about community - building rather than division and about wellbeing rather than just GDP. Here we see it appealing to our reason, to our compassion and to our commonsense. Alternatively, it can be used to drag us down to the lowest common denominators of human existence -instinct, hate and insularity.

There are many tests available to help us determine whether or not politics is working for the common good. Does the political class understand and respect the doctrine of the separation of powers and, in particular, the importance of the rule of law? Does the political class understand and respect the distinction between party and government? Does the political class understand the human realities of "dog-whistle politics"? Does the political class understand and respect the role of the public service?

This takes me to the case for public service, the title of tonight's JJC Bradfield Lecture.

#### JJC BRADFIELD

The fact that the lecture is named after the great visionary engineer and public servant John Job Crew Bradfield (1867-1943) led me to this subject of public service.

Bradfield worked for both the Queensland and New South Wales Governments. According to Jack Lang "he wanted to be the Napoleon of Sydney... He was always thinking about the future. He was probably the first man to plan for Sydney as a city of two million people". At the time of the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge - whose construction he had planned and supervised - Sydney's population was about 1.25 million. However, it was earlier in 1915 that Bradfield had called for the construction of the Harbour Bridge and a network of railways to cater for the expansion of the city which he thought would take its population to 2.2 million by 1950<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Sydney's population in 1950 turned out to be 1.69 million

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However, Bradfield was not just a behind-the-scenes public servant and engineer. He was a public advocate for his plans. As Peter Spearritt observed in his Australian Dictionary of Biography entry on Bradfield: "Bradfield maintained -apparently without reprimand from government -an extraordinary barrage of articles and public addresses advocating his plan". Respect for his expertise gave him licence to enter the public debate but in his later years his proposal for a massive water diversion scheme in Queensland was publicly criticised for its lack of scientific evidence.

Bradfield had achieved much and he was a public servant. What does that tell us? He played a role, indeed a significant role, in the development of Sydney. To put in the language of today -he delivered both advice and implementation for the governments of his time. He was a thinker and a doer.

The simple facts are these. You can't have democracy without politics. You can't have politics without politicians and you can't have politicians without public servants. They are an essential element in a properly functioning system of government. They provide advice, they run departments, they implement programs, they supervise and regulate, and they deliver services. Writing way back in 1887 Woodrow Wilson referred to the "science of administration". The role of the public servant, he said, was to "seek to straighten the paths of government, to make its business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organisation and to crown its duties with dutifulness". No better description can be found.

#### MANDARINS OR MANAGERS?

In recent times, however, there has been contention over what this actually means, particularly for those entrusted with the leadership of the public sector. Are they "mandarins" or are they "managers"? Are they "servants" or are they "leaders"? This takes us to a type of blame game. On the one side we often see politicians (and their private sector advisers) criticising public servants for their reluctance to embrace modern managerialism, public relations and a customer focus in their work. On the other side we often see public servants (and their academic supporters in the discipline of public administration) pointing to a decline in standards of service due to political appointments, a lack of employment security and the growing power of ministerial offices.

As is often the case with these issues both sides of the debate have a point -the politicians on a point of democratic principle and the public servants on a point of good government and public administration.

The principle is this -it is the role of the public service to support the government of the day. Woodrow Wilson put it this way: "Steady, hearty allegiance to the policy of the government they serve will constitute good behaviour". It is a sound democratic principle that helps define the special nature of the work and the disciplines that flow from it.

Should a government decide to pursue a policy of microeconomic reform within the public sector itself through policies such as privatisation, corporatisation, contracting out and rigorous performance management it is the responsibility of public servants to implement the program

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whatever their own views. If a government wants more accountability through competition it should be able to get it. So too would it be their responsibility to faithfully implement organisational, technological and cultural changes as are mandated by governments seeking to incorporate new management methodologies into their operations.

Governments will want (and need) such changes to be implemented efficiently and effectively. Management skills and capacities, particularly as they relate to change, are crucial. Amongst those skills are stakeholder management, communications and political savvy.

It also true that we have seen a real shift in our doctrine of ministerial responsibility. The traditional doctrine had it that Ministers were accountable for everything that happened in their agencies. Today, however, it is the senior public servant who is often held to account when things go wrong. In a sense, there is a logic to all of this given the operational realities of modern government (how can Ministers be held responsible for the many decisions that are made in their name but over which they have no effective control?) and the role of the Prime Minister (or Premier) in determining who should be in the Cabinet and who should head up the Departments of State. The Prime Minister makes the decision about who should carry the can, the Minister or Head of Department or both.

In making this call the Prime Minister has no hard and fast rules. It is a matter of judgement around which there will inevitably be political debate, media and academic commentary and, more often than not, reports from independent accountability agencies or government-initiated inquiries.

The case for the public service then is not that it should be shielded from scrutiny and responsibility by way of an outdated Westminster doctrine. The days of Sir Humphrey Appleby are over. We should be talking about managers rather than mandarins. We ought not to go back but that leaves unanswered the question- how far forward should we go?

#### EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS and ETHICS

Let me now turn from the principle of democratic accountability to the requirements of good government - efficiency, effectiveness and ethics. Efficiency is all about the costs of delivering the outputs of government, effectiveness about the achievement of social, economic and environmental outcomes from those outputs and ethics about the lawfulness and propriety of the way things are done.

Starting with the requirement of integrity in government I note that sections of the public service are themselves central players. Here I refer to the independent agencies of accountability such as Corruption Commissions, Auditors-General, Public Service Commissions and the Ombudsman. As Canadian writer Mark Schacter has observed:

"Citizens demand accountability in return for the powers granted to the executive to raise and spend revenue. The public sector responds by enforcing internal accountability measures, and by reporting to citizens on how money is spent and on successes (and failures) of public programs.

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Governments typically create and sustain independent public institutions of accountability that are empowered to oversee the government's actions and demand explanations."

It goes without saying that such agencies need a high degree of independence from the government of the day whose political interests may be at stake in any inquiry.

In a sense we are talking here of a public service within a public service. It reminds us that the democratic requirement that public servants support the government of the day needs to be complemented with the overarching principle of the public interest. In our system of government both elected and non-elected officials are subject to this requirement. Indeed, it is an obligation. As the Western Australian Royal Commission into Commercial Activities in Government put it: "The institutions of government and the officials and agencies of government exist for the public, to serve the interests of the public." In 1987 the NSW Court of Appeal referred to governments being "constitutionally required" to act in the public interest.

The concept of the public interest may be a difficult and complex one. It's more a set of guiding principles rather than a handbook of what to do. In some ways it is easier to describe what it isn't rather than what it is. Nevertheless, it is crucial to our system of government, being frequently referred to in legislation and forever used to contrast right from wrong in decision making. Forgetting or flouting this principle has led to the downfall of many a politician or public servant.

#### POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Good government, then, is not just about the interests of the majority. It also requires checks and balances. Such checks come not just from independent scrutiny from outside but also from a properly constituted and functioning public service. A somewhat crude characterisation of the situation goes something like this: Politicians are interested in power and what they can do with that power and public servants are there to ensure that what results is lawful as well as properly designed and implemented. Even Woodrow Wilson in his classic essay quoted earlier, understood that administration "is not and ought not to be a mere passive instrument". Governments that believe they and their political advisors are the sole repositories of knowledge and wisdom do so at their peril.

Yes it is true that the politicians are -and ought to be -the final arbiters of policy. However, in the noisy and media driven world of today they need to be reminded of the inherent complexity of things and that a range of options is almost always available for each problem. Not only is what we call "frank and fearless" advice important but so too is an element of flexibility in administration. By their very nature policies are defined and limited but have to be applied in a range of circumstances.

Those in the front-line of service delivery will need to be able to tailor their work to suit the circumstances. Such responsiveness is part and parcel of the daily reality of government. Indeed, this is where a lot of innovation takes place. As a large-scale Canadian study of public sector awards in the USA and Commonwealth countries found:

"Frontline workers and middle-managers account for half of the innovations generated in the US and the developing Commonwealth countries, rising to 82% in advanced Commonwealth

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countries. Policies that empowered communities, citizens or staff to drive change account for between 14 per cent and 30 per cent of the innovations surveyed."

Remember too that public servants nearly always work in conditions of scarcity - unlimited wants and limited resources. They often seek to lower the expectations of their customers and clients, trim their own sails according to what is available and seek help from the community to help deliver their programs. Reflection on these . sorts of results have led many academics to develop the concept of "public management" rather than "public administration" as it better describes the task at hand and the creativity involved in its practice.

#### POLITICIANS AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Ultimately it will be the government of the day that will determine the nature and culture of the public service. It is true that a considered debate about the way the departmental heads are going to be selected and what the terms and conditions of their appointment ought to be needs to be had, as it has been by way of Royal Commissions and other inquiries over the last twenty years. However, even if we were to return to a system of Public Service Commission appointments and accountability (as opposed to the system of government appointments and accountability) we would still be left with the issue of how a government relates to its public service. Will it be keen to hear what the public service tells it? Will it be interested in the role the public service does and can play in the government? Will it properly resource the public sector to do its job properly? Will it treat the public service with proper respect? Will it encourage innovation in public service management and service delivery? Will it ensure proper protocols exist in the way relations between ministerial offices and the public service are to be managed? Will it be keen to ensure there is adequate room in agency budgets for professional development and research? Will it expect public servants to cross the line when it comes to political neutrality? Will it take seriously the findings of the independent agencies of accountability? Will it ensure that the work of ministerial offices is subject to parliamentary scrutiny?

The way government answers these questions will be partly determined in its legislation and codes of conduct which outline roles and accountabilities. The extent to which an organisation institutionalises a commitment to high standards by way of independent scrutiny will be a key test of its bona fides. The existence of some form of Public Service Standards Commission with the role of advising and reviewing, if not appointing, is a minimum condition. It will also need to be a matter of expectation and culture. It is in this context that the concept of the public interest is so important. It is indispensable as a benchmark and guide.

The public interest broadens our understanding of the interests that are relevant when considering policy and compels us to think and act beyond the constraints imposed by self-interest and the pressures of today. It commits us to good process as well as good policy and to think about means as well as outcomes. Indeed it takes us into the world of good government and is the enemy of short-sightedness, maladministration and corruption.

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How should we conceive of the relationship between the political and administrative arms of government? I would say we should see it as a form of partnership. This implies that there are common as well as separate interests and obligations. Both have a duty to act in the public interest. For its part the Cabinet is akin to a Board of Directors setting the direction for the government. The Heads of Department are like modern Chief Executive Officers with the task of making it all happen and with an understanding that they work within the constraints of democratic government.

#### PUBLIC SERVANTS AS AGENTS FOR CHANGE

I use this analogy for another reason as well. Let me remind you of my preliminary comments on the challenges facing us today, both internationally and locally. They point to the need for collective purpose and collective action. This will require a more strategic approach to government, more concern for the long-term and for sustainable solutions that involve the community and the environment as well as the economy. It means co-operation between nations and between governments within nations.

What this will require are politicians concerned with more than just the next headline. It also means public servants empowered to do more than just delivering the service and balancing the books. It means strong government, personalised services, tougher regulation where it really matters, new partnerships for community development - particularly in health and education - and more citizen engagement generally. The knowledge, skills and attributes required to do all of this are many and varied - project and contract management, communication and presentation, teambuilding, performance management, crisis management, working with diverse cultures, strategic planning, stakeholder management, community consultation, and developing partnerships with the private sector and NGO's.

This means re-energising the public service as an agent for social change, not controlling and directing but enabling and facilitating. As a recent report from the UK put it: "No country in the world offers excellent public services to all its citizens without active, enabling government". We might add our own words to that quote: "No government in the world can achieve excellence without an active and enabling public service".

In saying this I am taken back to the era of government personified by Bradfield. It was an era in which there were significant increases in life expectancy. Why was this so? Colin Mathers and Bob Douglas have described it this way:

"The increases in life expectancy that occurred in the first half of the century were the result of rapid declines in mortality, particularly infant and maternal mortality, and mortality due to infectious diseases in childhood and early-adulthood. Access to better housing, sanitation and education; a trend to smaller families; growing incomes; and public health measures such as immunisation against infectious diseases, contributed much to these improvements in health."

In other words collective action through the public sector acting as regulator and service provider played a major role in the creation of the conditions for a healthier and more civilised life for

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many Australians. What better way is there to describe why it is that we need the best and the brightest to take up the calling of public service!