

Preface

Two images of Centrelink capture the essence of its foundation years of innovation and change. The first is the spirit of Centrelink—in its creation and in its operation in these formative years. This spirit is captured in the observation about

organisations that want to shape the future...The leaders of these companies encourage their people to challenge conventional thinking, to change the business dramatically, and to create continuous renewal and progress. These companies don't just want to survive—they want to lead. They want to write the rules that others will follow. (Pfeiffer 1998 quoted in Hamilton 2007:94)

The atmosphere in Cosmo,¹ the headquarters of Centrelink in the ACT suburb of Woden, was often charged with excitement and energy unlike anything encountered in conventional departments of state. Here one was struck by a concern with ideas and experiments, with seeking to push the frontiers of public management in the public interest and with doing the best for customers.

A second image was that of the guiding coalition, a regular two-day meeting of senior executives who would consider an issue and how to respond to it. Originally 55, later 80 or more, staff would wrestle with the dimensions of the problem, reach a consensual position and develop a means of proceeding.

This study concentrates on the first decade of Centrelink—the years in which Sue Vardon was chief executive officer (CEO)—which extended from 1996 to the end of 2004. Consideration is also given to the transition to the new governance arrangements in 2005–06 and a comparison is offered between the formative and restructured Centrelink by Margaret Hamilton, a former senior executive of the agency.

Centrelink was established in 1997 as the main service delivery agency for the Australian Government in the field of social policy and administration. It was to be a one-stop, multipurpose delivery agency providing services on behalf of several purchasing departments. The new agency took on the responsibility of delivering government services to some 7.8 million recipients of social welfare benefits and services, accounting for almost one-third of Commonwealth expenditure and employing well more than 20 000 staff spread across service delivery sites across Australia.

The Centrelink experiment has arguably generated more research attention than any other agency during this time, with doctoral dissertations (Hamilton 2007; Rowlands 2003; Wills 1999) and numerous publications (for example, Halligan 2004; Husock and Scott 1999a). Centrelink continues in 2008 to be an exemplar that engages international attention.

ENDNOTES

¹ The executive area of the Cosmopolitan Building in Canberra.