

Know and pace yourself: personal style and time allocation

The time secretaries devote personally to different aspects of their responsibilities depends on a number of factors including the functional responsibilities and size of the portfolio and department, the style of the minister(s) and the personal preferences and style of the secretary.

Personal style

Personal style is not a minor factor. Notwithstanding the development by the APS Commission of its generic SES leadership capabilities, each secretary (and each SES officer) has his or her own style of leadership. This affects how they do their job as secretary and how they allocate their scarce time. Being aware of this themselves is also important, to be mindful of the importance of roles that are not natural strengths but require personal effort and also to look to others in the senior team to complement their own strengths and preferences.

Among the secretaries of my era (first as an SES officer and then as a secretary of three successive departments) who I admired and learned from, there was a significant variation in styles:



Tony Ayers (former Secretary of the departments of Defence, Aboriginal Affairs, Social Security and Health and Community Services) was a wonderful manager of people and had a keen sense of what was feasible: a can-do operator rather than a policy analyst, close to ministers, with a great political 'nose', a delegator of authority to others (but insisting on being kept fully informed)



Ian Castles (former Secretary of the Department of Finance and Australian Government Statistician) was the top intellectual throughout my time in the APS, a careful researcher and analyst and consummate presenter of the evidence at the right time, but allowing others to lead in the management of his agencies



Mike Keating (former Secretary of the departments of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Finance and Employment and Industrial Relations) was a driver of reform, a hands-on developer of policy with government ministers and a hard task master demanding prompt implementation



Helen Williams (former Public Service Commissioner and secretary of many departments, including Education, Tourism, Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Information Technology and the Arts, and Human Services) was always insistent on rigour, whether in advice or in financial management, putting great effort into marshalling the expertise and resources of her agency while always taking personal responsibility for the advice given and the programs managed.

All of these devoted considerable time to supporting their ministers, but while Ayers would be in frequent personal contact by phone or in meetings, Williams divided that with marshalling the work in her department and testing it for accuracy and appropriateness; Castles would be doing personal research and analysis with a small number of key staff; and Keating would be personally switching between ministers, his own officers, officers in other agencies and senior people in the states to drive the reforms he was enthusiastically pursuing, looking for common ground without compromising anything he regarded as important.

Table 2.1 The Castles' policy art

Ian Castles' personal contribution to policy research and advice was extraordinary. His staff tended either to love him for this or to despair, as he appeared to ignore other matters. I was clearly in the first camp, perhaps because I was fortunate to find our interests often coincided.

I had the privilege to work with him on family allowances reform (1976), income tax reform (1977–78 and 1985) and superannuation reform (1983 and 1985), among many major policy initiatives. He had a great sense of timing and a brilliant capacity to identify a radical alternative option and to present the arguments in favour—he was never happier than

when taking on well-entrenched views, either within the bureaucracy or among famous outside commentators.

An example of his style was his paper 'Economists and anti-economists', prepared for ANZAAS in 1984 when he was Secretary of the Department of Finance.

This paper, much larger than an article but shorter than a book, was ostensibly about the role and contribution of economists in the century after the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. It was also, however, a comprehensive rebuttal of internationally prominent scholars and television presenters Kenneth Clark and John Kenneth Galbraith who had been misrepresenting economists to pursue their own agendas, and a cry for economists to continue to contribute to the scientific study of social and economic issues. Castles marshalled the resources of the National Library of Australia to help him demonstrate the concern for public welfare of economists such as Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo, and their challenging of the establishment of their day, taking on power and privilege gained from abuse of markets and from inadequate government involvement in areas such as education, and promoting what were radical views at the time on matters such as civil liberties and the role of women.

Castles spent hours for days at a time in the National Library preparing this superb paper, managing, for example, to draw on personal correspondence during the Irish potato famine. The paper, however, had no direct impact on current policy, let alone on financial management.

Did he neglect his other duties? There were those in the Finance department who felt he did, but I look back on the 1980s as the period during which Finance built its reputation as a powerhouse of policy and financial management reform. Castles' efforts inspired many to raise their standards of policy analysis, emphasising research and evidence.

Peter Walsh (Minister for Finance, 1984–90) has since written that, despite rarely seeing Castles, he was impressed with the quality of written advice Castles provided and the support provided by the whole department under Castles' leadership. He said that, when they did meet, Castles spoke to him as if he were at a university seminar.

I suspect that in allocating time to different responsibilities, Williams put more effort into managing her department than the others, ensuring its financial robustness in particular. Ayers also gave particular emphasis to management matters, in his case focusing very strongly on people. Whichever department

he led, he also played a major role in mentoring people and advising heads of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) on succession management. Keating and Castles spent more of their own personal energy in developing and advising on policy, Castles being probably least involved of the four in managing the department, relying extensively on other senior officials to help him in that role.

There have also been some secretaries I have not admired. Their styles also varied, but the aspects that I most disliked were the effort of some to win personal political favour at the expense of rigorous policy advice or proper process, and the willingness of some to avoid responsibility or to bully and attach blame to others, including within their own organisations, in order to curry favour.

Allocation of time

Summarising my own allocation of time in different departments is not easy. I have no data on the time I spent at home on various activities and only limited records of time in the office or attending external meetings. It is also not always easy to allocate particular activities to one of the range of responsibilities listed in Chapter 1. Moreover, some activities are cyclical, such as the budget and Senate Committee hearings, requiring some way of averaging time allocation over the year.

The following is a very rough estimate of my allocation of time as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Regional Development in 1995, as Secretary of the Department of Health and Family Services in 1997 and as Secretary of the Department of Health and Aged Care in 2000. On average, I would probably spend between 50 and 60 hours each working week in the office or elsewhere on departmental business and another 10 to 15 hours a week working from home. This pace was maintained for the 11 years I was a secretary or Public Service Commissioner, though a similar effort was also required when I was a deputy in the Department of Defence and a division head in the Department of Finance.

Table 2.2 Time allocation

Area of activity	Housing and Regional Development 1995 (%)	Health and Family Services 1997 (%)	Health and Aged Care 2000 (%)
(a) Supporting the minister	50	35	40
(b) Supporting the government as a whole	< 5	< 5	5
(c) Working with the Parliament	< < 5	< 5	< 5
(d) Management of the department/agency	15	30	25
(e) Management of the portfolio	< 5	5	10
(f) External relationships			
— with other Commonwealth agencies	5	5	< 5
— with other governments	10	10	10
— with non-governmental bodies	< 5	10	5
(g) Contributing to APS capability	< 5	< < 5	< < 5

A number of activities could be allocated to several of these areas. A key rule in preparing this table is that I have allocated time involved in policy analysis or review to 'supporting the minister' where my work was on specific policy matters leading to advice to the minister; if it involved broader management of policy advising, including policy forums in the department, I have allocated it to 'management of the department/agency'.

The Health department is a large organisation, in a large portfolio with extensive stakeholders and interest groups. Despite the huge policy agenda involved, it is not surprising that I spent more time on management and on external relationships there than I did when in the Department of Housing and Regional Development, which has a far smaller policy-oriented department. I had more time when in the Housing department to contribute personally to the policy agenda and to APS capability matters (this was the period when the *Public Service Act* was first being reviewed).

The increased time with the Parliament in 2000 reflected a period of intense scrutiny of the health portfolio and my decision to lead the departmental team personally during the relevant Senate Committee hearings.

I suspect my personal interest and capacity in policy contributed to the allocation of time to policy development throughout my time as secretary, and similarly I might have spent more time than some colleagues on external relationships, particularly beyond the confines of government (for example, with academics and international networks).

Changes over time

As discussed in more detail in later chapters, there has been a shift in the balance of responsibilities particularly as a result of the public sector reforms during the 1980s and 1990s. These increased the management responsibilities of secretaries, both in running their departments and overseeing their portfolios, and tended to reduce the time they could personally devote to policy development and review.

The expectation of greater responsiveness to ministers, and of helping them manage the pressures they face from the 24/7 media cycle, has also made it more difficult to devote personal time and departmental resources to longer-term policy research and analysis.

Nonetheless, heads of Commonwealth departments are still expected to contribute more personally to policy development than those heading state departments.

The pressures of the past 20 years might also have caused some convergence of styles and possibly some increased emphasis on generalist skills among secretaries. This has been offset in part, however, by greater mobility in and out of the Public Service, including at more senior levels. The mobility is still modest and

most external appointments are of people well experienced in the public sector, albeit more nowadays have state government backgrounds. While there has been movement from the top level of the Public Service to academia, the private sector and the community sector, there has been little if any real movement in the other direction.

Any convergence of styles has also been offset by modest improvements in gender diversity. Williams is no longer the only female departmental secretary, particularly since the appointment of three women in 2004 along with Lynelle Briggs as Public Service Commissioner. I well remember the coasters Sue Vardon (CEO of Centrelink, 1997–2004) gave me for my office in the APS Commission calling for ‘five in five’ (five female departmental secretaries within the next five years); she was one of many pleased to see the shift occur so quickly. That shift will almost certainly continue, as female representation in the APS is steadily moving up the hierarchy.

Issues concerning styles and competencies

The increase in management responsibilities has reduced the time secretaries have to focus on high-quality policy advising. This impact can be exaggerated, however. Commonwealth departmental secretaries still spend considerable time personally on policy advice and on marshalling policy analysis in their departments. I believe the overall quality has diminished for the reasons outlined above, but many secretaries still have formidable competence in their various policy fields and can and do win the policy arguments against the views of external ‘experts’ in confidential ministerial forums. Notwithstanding the emphasis on generalist skills (which are indeed important, particularly those relating to deep understanding of parliamentary and government processes), most secretaries do have considerable expertise relevant to the particular responsibilities of their departments.

The increase in engagement outside the Public Service has also given senior public servants wider perspectives than they might have had in the past, from which to draw on when giving advice. Moreover, arguably, the increased involvement of external groups in the political process has offset some of the reduced capacity within the Public Service.

A perennial criticism of the senior echelons of the APS has been that they represent a narrow and privileged group in the Australian community with a common orthodoxy about social and economic policy. I do not share that view, notwithstanding the obvious fact that white, Anglo-Saxon males have dominated the SES since Federation, and the many efforts (my own included) to ensure better opportunities for women and Indigenous people in particular to succeed in the APS.

As Ian Castles highlighted some years ago, the APS is not a bastion of privilege and it might be that the senior echelons are more representative of their society and culture than counterparts in other countries. The APS certainly does have further to go, but it leads most state public services (though not some overseas, such as New Zealand and Canada) and private sector companies in the employment of senior women and Indigenous Australians. With the exception of people with a disability, the trend lines for senior jobs are consistently in the right direction in terms of broadening participation. Mobility is also increasing, though modestly.

Table 2.3 Secretaries: an elite class or a reflection of an egalitarian, upwardly mobile community?

Ian Castles defended the Public Service against criticism in the 1980s that it represented an elite and powerful class. He did so by detailing the personal background of the then five most recent Secretaries to the Treasury, highlighting how many came from modest family backgrounds and had risen to the top through great personal sacrifice along with strong family and government support.

The four secretaries I have highlighted as people I particularly respected and learned from over my career also have varied backgrounds.

- Tony Ayers was born in modest circumstances in Fitzroy. The son of a junior public servant in the Customs Service, he had a good education through scholarships including to St Kevin's College. He also supported his education for a while earning pocket money working for an SP bookie. He gained a social work degree and then worked in Victorian prisons as a parole officer before joining the Commonwealth.
- Ian Castles was from Sale in country Victoria, where his father was a hardware merchant. He completed his schooling at Wesley College after attending state schools in Sale, going on to do a commerce degree at Melbourne University.
- Mike Keating was also brought up in rural Victoria, by his widowed mother, who relied on her War Widows Pension while he was young. He gained various government scholarships to pursue his education, going on to complete an economics degree at Melbourne University, and later obtaining his PhD.
- Helen Williams was born in Adelaide but spent much of her childhood in England, where her father was a senior academic in economics. She completed a history and sociology degree at Reading

University, a 'redbrick' establishment. She returned to Australia when her father was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University.

None of the four could be said to have come from a highly privileged background. Two progressed from modest rural backgrounds and one from the inner Melbourne working class.

My own background is middle class. My father was an engineer in the NSW Public Service and my mother a casual teacher at Asquith Girls High School. I am one of seven children and attended public schools in Sydney until my final two years at Shore before going to Sydney University, completing a science degree in pure mathematics.

The criticism of a narrow orthodoxy among secretaries is harder to refute, partly because the nature of the job virtually precludes secretaries from holding extreme views. Most do have strong personal views of broad policies that would enhance the public interest, while also accepting absolutely the right of the elected government to set policy. Most, and certainly the best, are not blinkered in their views but are genuinely open-minded and are keen to find the relevant research and analysis, including evaluation of past policies. There are nonetheless some common threads about the benefits of free trade and well-functioning markets, with governments intervening only where clearly justified in order to redistribute resources to those not able to rely on markets, to address market failures and to provide public goods and to support social capital. All those whose views I know believe firmly in a very substantial role for government to enhance the wellbeing of Australians. Beyond these broad threads, however, there are wide variations of views among secretaries: from liberal to conservative, from strong support for redistribution to strong belief in self-reliance, from philistines to disciples of the arts, from mathematicians and physicists to historians and sociologists to economists and accountants.

A related criticism even harder to refute is the 'clubbish' nature of the departmental secretary clique in Canberra. I have certainly found great support through regular informal lunches with colleagues. It is lonely at the top and such networking provides valuable opportunities to compare notes. For years, I shared the common criticism in the 1970s of the Commonwealth Club as the centre of public service power, yet for a long time failed to see that our lunches were not really all that different.

Table 2.4 Tony Ayers' club

In the 1970s, it was de rigueur for permanent secretaries to be members of the Commonwealth Club. A challenge for some Whitlamite appointments was to break down the barriers to this perceived establishment power base including by widening membership. I recall vividly the evening Marie Coleman, Chair of the Social Welfare Commission, was escorted to the club for dinner by Sir Frederick Wheeler, Secretary to the Treasury.

By the time my generation joined the ranks of secretaries, most of us shunned any association with that apparent bastion of establishment power. Tony Ayers had already set the example with his working-class club, the Emperor's Court Chinese Restaurant in Yarralumla. We joined him there or met at other no more salubrious restaurants around Canberra.

My pride in our rejection of prestigious places of establishment power was effectively pricked, however, when a member of my staff told me bluntly: 'Wherever you blokes meet is the centre of establishment power in Canberra.'

People appointed from outside do face a challenge if they are not included quickly into such networks. Stephen Duckett (Secretary of the Health department, 1994–96) certainly told me how much he appreciated our invitation to him to join the lunches Tony Blunn (then Secretary of the Social Security department) and I hosted of heads of the social policy departments at that time, finding these enormously helpful for breaking into the Canberra scene.

I am not sure that the reliance on such informal networks is unique to the Australian Public Service. All governments have elaborate systems for collective decision making and anyone wanting to influence decisions has to build formal and informal networks; it comes with the territory. Perhaps, however, the networks in Canberra can present an obstacle to the broadening of perspectives that might be expected from an increasingly mobile public sector executive workforce.

Lessons about time and pace

Secretaries generally work very long hours, in the office and at home. Most spend at least half a day every weekend just trying to catch up on the previous week's work and prepare for the week ahead.

Each secretary has an individual style, but all struggle to balance the responsibilities involved and to stop the urgent getting in the way of the important. Those I admired most put great effort into preserving a medium to

long-term perspective and fostering a depth of knowledge and analysis to draw on, avoiding the danger of being overly reactive.

This can be done in various ways: having a strong team of able officers, insisting on 'due process', ensuring robust information systems, constantly testing the analysis provided, exhibiting a healthy scepticism and an understanding of practical realities. Usually all of these are required, though the mix will differ with each personality.

Setting priorities is always a challenge. In most portfolios, it is simply impossible to keep on top of the detail, and it is dangerous to try. Equally, however, never delving into details can leave a secretary (and the minister and department) vulnerable when things go wrong. Rolling up the sleeves is, in my view, an essential quality to ensure a minister's priorities are addressed and to demonstrate to staff from time to time the importance of getting the details right.

Establishing priorities also involves taking advantage of cycles. Parliamentary breaks are a useful opportunity to review longer-term strategies. Trips abroad (possibly with the minister) are a time to reflect on policies and performance in the light of international experience. When things go wrong (which happens to all secretaries sometime), it is all hands to the pump, and there is little if any time to reflect on the crisis or to attend to all the other responsibilities not in crisis.

Families inevitably suffer, though most secretaries attempt to set aside some regular period for families, whether through an annual two or three-week holiday, or a Sunday evening dinner, or chauffeuring the children to Saturday morning sport.

Sharing the experience with peers in informal settings also relieves the pressure of work. It is not always possible to discuss issues within the department, or with family and friends, but I have always found having lunch regularly with some other secretaries with whom I share views on the Public Service provides great reassurance. There is a risk, however, that such networks present barriers to newcomers.

Photo acknowledgments

Tony Ayers when Secretary of the Department of Defence (photo by kind permission of the Department of Defence)

Ian Castles when Australian Government Statistician (photo by kind permission of the Australian Bureau of Statistics)

Michael Keating (photo by kind permission of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet)

Helen Williams when Secretary of the Department of Human Services (photo with kind permission of the Department of Human Services)