

Secretaries' personal development, support and performance assessment

Elements

Secretaries and other agency heads are all individuals with their own personal histories and personal styles and habits. Nonetheless, there are common skills and capabilities required for these jobs that need to be developed and nurtured, and their application supported and assessed. This chapter is a little more personal than the others, reflecting my own background and style, while also attempting to draw out issues and lessons. It canvasses:

- career planning and development
- continuing professional development
- personal support
- performance assessment.

Career planning and development

Australia does not have a formal, structured approach to grooming people for top public service positions, unlike practice in some other countries such as the United Kingdom and Singapore. Our approach is more *laissez faire*, relying almost entirely on personal career decisions and merit processes for selection to each and every position, at least up to the higher bands of the SES. This approach has been reinforced in recent times in response to increased mobility and increased lateral recruitment into the APS, including at SES and agency head levels.

There have, however, been influential schemes, particularly for young graduate recruits, whose impact on the senior echelons of the APS continues to the present. When I was a secretary, I was one of several former Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) cadets who were agency heads. Others included Michael Keating and Neil Johnston. There were many more in the 1980s (for example, Vince FitzGerald, Chris Higgins and Michael Codd). There are still at least three former administrative trainees among the current group of secretaries (Helen Williams, Andrew Metcalfe and Terry Moran); Allan Hawke and Roger Beale were others in my time. Ian Watt was a Treasury cadet.

These schemes did not so much groom people for future senior roles (though they did provide participants with excellent training), as recruit some of the best and brightest, encourage them to commit to a career in the APS and promote their ambitions for higher achievement. After a year or two of special treatment, the participants were left to their own devices to pursue their preferred career paths, and a remarkable number proved successful.

Most of my cohort of ABS cadets chose to leave the bureau a few years after coming to Canberra, having gained an interest in some area of policy with which they had become familiar through ABS statistical work; a few left the Public Service. In my case, I developed an interest in social policy and alleviation of poverty, having worked on the Henderson Poverty Inquiry surveys. The ABS cadetship certainly succeeded in convincing me to commit to an APS career, even though the bureau had my services for only about four years after my graduation. Some stayed in the bureau. One, Dennis Trewin, later became the Statistician, succeeding another former cadet, Bill McLennan.

My commitment to the Public Service strengthened during and directly after the Whitlam Government, as I studied public administration part-time at The Australian National University and as I was given remarkable opportunities for someone my age to advise on income security and welfare matters. I also matured greatly in my understanding of public service professionalism during this time. When I joined the Social Welfare Commission in 1974, I accepted the widely held view in the Whitlam Government of an antagonistic public service, but this was replaced during 1975 by a growing respect for the quality of the advice I saw emanating from the more traditional departments, Treasury, Social Security and the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Individuals such as Colin McAlister (Social Security), Sir William (then Bill) Cole (Treasury) and Ian Castles (PM&C), revealed to me a professionalism that served the government and involved rigorous analysis with frank and open debate among individual public servants and agencies. The revelation of the 'Loans affair' and the courageous advice from Sir Frederick Wheeler to Prime Minister Whitlam added to my appreciation of the value of a somewhat independent, professional public service. I was still keen to see reforms to the Public Service such as through greater public engagement and more understanding of disadvantaged Australians, and looked positively towards the report of the Coombs Royal Commission (the Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration), which reported in 1976.

Working in the Department of Social Security in the late 1970s, when Senator Margaret Guilfoyle was the minister, capped this stage of my development as her relationship with the department, and in particular with the Development Division where I worked, proved to be the most constructive and professional one that I experienced in my whole career.

My development was therefore primarily experiential, rather than based on formal training, though my studies at The Australian National University and reading of the Coombs Commission reports and papers gave me some good grounding in public administration history.

From time to time, there have been programs for the feeder group into the SES to help those with potential to build up their capacity through training and/or

work experience. These schemes, such as the Executive Development Scheme (EDS), were effective for a while in identifying potential leaders and giving them broader experience, but they were never really focused on those expected to go to the top. They were more successful in helping those trapped in the system to find better career paths and maximise their potential. The Senior Women in Management (SWIM) scheme was particularly effective in this regard.

For the most part, serious consideration of people for top positions begins only when they are well entrenched in the SES with a proven record at that level. As I have described elsewhere, this is still managed in a light-touch way, with agency heads encouraged to consider succession management, and appropriate development of those with potential.

I was promoted early to the SES, in 1978, while only twenty-nine years old. This was not entirely unusual at that time given the then age structure of the service, with many post-World War II recruits nearing retirement, an explosion of recruitment in the late 1960s and early 1970s and enormous growth in Commonwealth programs and employment in the Whitlam era. Nonetheless, I had virtually no management experience and no management training, though I had established a reputation for policy analysis in income security in particular. Moreover, I was extremely sceptical of the advantages of management training of any sort and derided colleagues who employed such nerdy techniques as diaries; I believed I could manage anything on my ear.

I was terribly wrong, though I avoided being found out through any major disaster, partly because I had the continued good fortune of being among teams of very able individuals who did not need much managing, and who taught me subtly some basics such as supervision, research management and budget cycle planning, as well as applied policy skills such as drafting cabinet submissions and briefings (McAlister, my division head in the Department of Social Security, was particularly helpful as a coach). I also found I could draw on my policy skills not only to analyse issues but to reshape small teams to address what I saw as emerging priorities. In the Social Security department in the late 1970s, these included a stronger focus on tax and social security linkages and occupational superannuation, and moving away from the previous Whitlam Government's focus on national compensation and national superannuation.

When I moved to the Finance department in 1982, I was still cynical about management training, but began to learn much more on the job about financial management and managing a branch. On promotion to division head in the Finance department in 1986, I first started consciously to think about my management responsibilities. I had about 70 staff and responsibility for financial oversight of about six portfolios as well as public sector employment matters (for the Defence Force and the Public Service). I even engaged a consultant, Bill Godfrey, to help with some strategic planning for the division, which led us to

focus on being in essence a consultancy business, with the capacity and flexibility to provide high-quality advice and scrutiny, responding quickly to emerging government priorities. We focused on such issues as our structure, our skills requirements and our relationships with agencies in our patch, as well as our budget and staff resources, which had been the main focus of earlier business planning. I suspect this was a first within the Finance department, although by then Finance was promoting financial management improvement throughout the APS.

Shortly afterwards, I attended my first ever management training. It changed my attitude to training completely.

Table 11.1 'Top management' training

The 1989 'Top Management' course was sponsored by the Public Service Commission and attended by Band 2 and 3 officers considered by their agency heads to have potential for top positions. It was my first ever management training course. The selection of participants was not bad, as it included half a dozen future secretaries (including Steve Sedgwick, Allan Hawke and Jo Hewitt) and a future Chief of the Navy (Rear Admiral Ian McDougall). The course included substantial material on strategic planning, with a case study by groups of participants on the future of Australian construction services and training in communications and media.

I kept the course material and my notes for the rest of my career, drawing on them in each new agency I joined. I finally understood that management skills could be learned through formal training and on-the-job experience and was not just something you developed with intelligence and the right personality.

With hindsight, I can now see the hidden guidance and career planning that was being orchestrated by some APS leaders, particularly the commission and the head of the Department of PM&C, but also by Tony Ayers and Michael Keating (then in the Finance department).

I first became very aware of this when I was approached by Ayers to apply to be a deputy secretary in the Defence department. There was no doubt his approach came after discussions with Keating and others, and reflected Ayers' interest in the Public Service as a whole, not just the Defence department.

Table 11.2 Informal career planning: lunch with Tony Ayers

In early 1990, Tony Ayers invited me to lunch to 'talk about my future'. I had worked with Ayers in Social Security, but we had separated

somewhat unhappily in 1982 and had not had much interaction since. I was intrigued and agreed to meet him at his 'club', a Chinese restaurant in Yarralumla.

There he proposed that I apply for an impending deputy vacancy in the Department of Defence, in charge of capital procurement and logistics—perhaps the biggest management job for a deputy in the APS. I was stunned: I had limited management experience, limited understanding of defence and no technical expertise in engineering or project management.

Ayers felt that, with suitable support in the organisation, I could handle the job. He told me that Michael Keating considered I was the best manager in the Finance department and could draw on that in this much larger task. He was also looking for stronger financial discipline and probity in defence acquisitions.

Importantly, he spoke about my future career in the APS. He said I was likely to be approached to be a deputy in the Finance department in the next year or so, but accepting that would be a mistake. I already had nearly eight years in Finance and, if promoted again there, I might forever be perceived as a Finance person. His view was that I should be looking to move back into a line agency where I could make a greater contribution to public policy.

If I wanted to head a line department, however, I needed to learn a lot more about management. My management experience to date relied on knowing personally all my people and knowing personally the matters they were dealing with. I needed to learn how to manage when it was not physically possible to know everyone or to know all the subject matter. This required much greater skills in people management, in delegation of authority and in selective reporting and oversight.

So it was that later in 1990 I went to the Department of Defence and learned far more about management while (hopefully) contributing to defence capability not only during my four years in the department but for the next decade and more as projects such as over-the-horizon radar came into operation.

My first appointment as secretary was to the Department of Administrative Services and the Arts, where my main responsibilities were business and financial management. While excited by the challenges of the commercialisation agenda at the time and keen to see through the reforms, I was a little uneasy that I was destined now to be seen primarily as a manager, whereas I still desired to contribute to social policy. Such opportunities soon arose, perhaps a little too

quickly (I was in this department for only four months before being moved to the Department of Housing and Regional Development).

Continuing professional development

Secretaries, like anyone else, need to maintain their professional capacity. I chose to remain actively involved in a number of professional associations, such as the IPAA, the Australian Institute of Management, the Economics Society and the Australian College of Health Service Executives. I participated regularly in seminars and conferences, as a speaker and, more importantly and more often, as a listener and learner.

On occasions, I arranged for the executive team to participate together in a management conference to consider possible new approaches and to strengthen our own ties.

I also had wonderful assistance from the agencies' librarians, particularly Titi Alexander, who moved to the Health department after the demise of the Department of Administrative Services, where we had first met. Alexander regularly checked with me my main interests and ensured I received relevant journal articles, book summaries and reviews, and so on, aware of my limited time to read much at length.

I never rose to the heights of Castles in keeping up with research in the professional fields I specialised in, but I still modelled my investment in continuing professional development on his approach and that of other secretaries I worked with who placed emphasis on keeping up with the research, such as Mike Keating, Neil Johnston, Ted Evans and Steve Sedgwick.

Personal support to the office of the secretary

Secretaries need considerable personal support to play their role effectively. This includes a personal secretary (or executive assistant). I was fortunate to have a series of quite excellent secretaries who were extraordinarily hardworking and dedicated and personally loyal. The role is complex and sensitive. There are the obvious duties of managing appointments, handling minor correspondence and preparing notes, managing papers and handling administration such as travel, all of which require particular competencies. Then there are the mostly unstated roles of:

- ensuring the secretary has quality time to think and read and write
- controlling access to the secretary without being seen to do so
- reflecting the style that the secretary wants presented to staff and clients.

Each of my secretaries had their own personalities, but all had a good sense of humour and the ability to present me and the office as open, with their role being to facilitate access, not limit it. They also knew it was important to convey

a professional image to staff and to external stakeholders. They all served me well. My last secretary, Theresa Graham, worked with me in the Health department and the APS Commission, and subsequently in the Department of PM&C. Her style was understated, being approachable to all staff and never threatening, yet able quietly to help me discipline the allocation of my time. She is a treasure.

In large organisations, I found the need for a 'staff officer' or senior executive assistant, as well as a secretary. I learned this in the Defence department, where two and three-star officers in particular used staff officers. Their role is primarily to keep the flow of papers and actions going whether or not the secretary (or general or admiral or air vice-marshal) has made the requested decision or signed the requested paper. They need to understand the issues under consideration, the likely line the secretary will take and the factors involved and know the likely time line for decisions. They take minutes of the executive meetings and may sit in on some other meetings to keep a record. They also have easy access to the secretary and can alert him or her to particular deadlines or concerns. They can also be a sounding board for the secretary on the mood of the organisation, or parts of the organisation.

Table II.3 'Staffing' as a verb

A lesson from the Department of Defence was the use of the word 'staffing' as a verb, not a noun.

This use relates to the process before a matter is put to a senior defence committee or executive for a decision to ensure there has been adequate consultation and the outstanding differences narrowed sufficiently to allow efficient and effective use of senior management's time. The matter must be 'staffed'.

Staff officers in particular are expected to manage this process, not to limit options or force consensus, but to help senior management focus on the critical issues and options and to ensure managers down the line take and share responsibility rather than delegate upwards. The process is not, however, reliant on having staff officers—it can work through other means of horizontal management across programs and divisions ahead of senior management decision making.

The staff officer (or senior executive assistant) and the departmental secretary need to be careful. In the Defence department, I often saw staff officers overplay their hands and their two or three-star officer bosses found themselves pressed into a position without sufficient personal attention towards the issues and implications (sometimes the fault lay with a lazy senior officer). On occasions,

the staff officers also exaggerated the power and authority of their general or admiral, distancing him from others rather than ensuring better communications.

Another danger that occurred once or twice in the Housing department was allowing the senior executive assistant to inhibit the vital relationship among the department's executive. I made the mistake of asking my senior executive assistant to sit in on some sensitive executive discussions and to take minutes, when those discussions needed to be in private: my deputies made their anger known to me very sharply afterwards!

As a rule, I was extremely well served by my senior executive assistants. I also used the position to help develop some promising executive-level staff who needed some 'broadening' before being considered for more senior jobs.

I did not use a staff officer in the APS Commission as the span of control did not warrant it. Besides, I had an executive assistant then who was more than capable of playing both roles.

The other element of personal support within the department is the relationship among the departmental executive. This relationship is essentially professional, but it is always personal too. This does not mean regular dinner parties at home, but a genuine empathy that provides support whether through difficult times in the department or challenges in personal lives. Attending the funeral of a colleague's close family member or celebrating a family wedding—these minor gestures strengthen ties and ensure broader mutual support.

The critical factor in the relationship is trust among all parties, notwithstanding the authority of the secretary.

Table 11.4 Trust within the executive

Tony Ayers taught me a key principle behind ensuring trust within a small executive when I joined him in the Department of Defence in 1990. At our first meeting on the first morning, he told me firmly that if I had a dispute with any of the other deputies under no circumstances was I to raise the matter privately with him. I was to sort it out myself directly or, if that was not possible, to raise the matter openly with the others present for a confidential but collegiate discussion.

I insisted on exactly the same behaviour in each agency I managed, and in every case the executive worked well, with trust and mutual personal support.

It is lonely at the top, and not even the deputies can be enjoined in some issues. Michael Keating took me out to lunch when I was first appointed secretary to give me some useful private advice. Perhaps the best element was his advice to maintain some external networks, particularly among other secretaries I respected

highly, not only for advice on specific matters I could not discuss within the department (indeed often I could not discuss any specifics with anyone outside either), but for more general mutual support.

This I did, not only with some fellow secretaries but with longstanding friends and former colleagues, ensuring substantial support and also keeping my feet on the ground through continuing contacts with people with different perspectives on work and life. I consciously maintained about four or five networks, mostly in Canberra but also in Sydney and abroad.

Finally, but not least in importance, is the support of family. I never did get the balance right between work and family, but my weakness was made up by my family's tolerance and support. I am not sure that future secretaries can assume the same.

Performance assessment

As mentioned in Chapter 6, a key contributor to organisational performance is the timely, positive, comprehensive and fair feedback to individuals on their performance, along with clear alignment between their work requirements and the organisation's objectives. The agency head also needs regular feedback and confirmation that he or she is focusing on the right things.

The next chapter on the role of the Public Service Commissioner describes the processes that used to exist for assessing the performance of secretaries. I have also written elsewhere about the problems of performance pay for secretaries, particularly the risk of overemphasising political factors and under-emphasising professional management, leadership and the promotion of APS Values. I am pleased the Rudd Government has dropped performance pay for secretaries, but there is now the danger that feedback might also disappear.

Before performance pay, I used the department's strategic plan as a form of agreement with the minister going beyond the outputs and outcomes identified in budget documentation to cover a wide range of management priorities: in essence, a form of 'balanced score card'. It went beyond my personal responsibilities but, in the absence of a formal performance agreement, it provided a reasonable basis for feedback on my performance. I did not seek such feedback from the minister or the Secretary of the Department of PM&C (or the APS Commission) in any formal way, but I did try to speak to the minister at least once a year about how we were tracking against the plan, and more generally against his expectations.

With the introduction of performance pay, the process became more formalised. I generally prepared a short minute to the minister near the beginning of the year on the priorities I should personally address, drawing on the strategic plan and the Prime Minister's charter letter. I sought opportunities about twice a year for personal feedback and, in line with the formal processes, prepared a

'self-evaluation' each year for the minister's endorsement before passing it on to the Secretary of the Department of PM&C and the APS Commission.

Mostly, the feedback discussions with the minister were only tangentially related to the minute I had originally prepared or the self-evaluation.

Table 11.5 Ministerial feedback

The aide-mémoire I prepared for the minister in 2000 regarding my performance agreement for the year listed:

- specific policy and program priorities
- specific management priorities
- ministerial support activities
- leadership priorities
- values issues (highlighting accountability, managing conflicts of interest and promoting public service professionalism).

The discussion I had with Minister Wooldridge in December 2000 in fact canvassed informally a wider range of related matters, including:

- my personal style, including whether (as Moore-Wilton had advocated) I should spend more time in the minister's office (the minister confirmed his preference for my practice of working mostly from the department)
- my policy advising, including the priorities for my personal attention (the minister was particularly keen for me to remain closely involved in all budget matters)
- a number of management issues, primarily concerning the quality of the top team and succession management (the minister was mostly highly complimentary about the team) but also about resource pressures on the department and my proposal to involve an external person on the department's management committee (he supported Bill Scales' involvement)
- some leadership issues (the minister was keen for me to maintain and strengthen links with various health professional organisations and complimented me on the role I played across the portfolio) and communications management (the minister wanted me to give this more attention, particularly the capacity to respond quickly to media criticisms of the government, which I struggled to do)
- appointments to portfolio boards
- Centenary of Federation celebrations, including the eightieth anniversary of the first Commonwealth Department of Health.

Subsequent to this discussion, I provided the minister with notes against the agreed priorities set out in the original aide-mémoire, taking into account his comments. My notes highlighted:

- on policy and program priorities, the private health insurance Lifetime Community Cover success, the progress on rural initiatives and the progress on health reform initiatives such as health information, enhanced primary care through the MOU with GPs and other agreements that also improved financial risk management
- on management, the lessons drawn from the aged care and MRI crises and the turnaround in both areas in terms of quality and financial control, the strengthening of the department's senior team and the competent management of IT outsourcing
- on ministerial support, the improvement in managing communications and correspondence while noting there was further to go
- on leadership, the improved governance arrangements in the department and portfolio and my personal role in strengthening linkages across the health system and promoting a coherent strategic direction
- on values, highlighting my standing with the IPAA and our improvements in managing conflicts of interest since the MRI crisis.

The minister endorsed my notes, which I then copied to Moore-Wilton and Williams for consideration in their advice to the Prime Minister on my performance. The performance pay suspended in 2000 was reinstated in 2001 and I was also reappointed to the Health department on a new three-year contract.

I also looked for an opportunity each year, before finalising the annual report, to seek feedback on how well the department had performed in meeting the minister's requirements in each program area. From this, we were able to prepare the assessment in the published report but, as well, the discussion inevitably provided feedback on my own performance and that of my senior staff from the point of view of the minister.

The Secretary of the Department of PM&C provided occasional feedback, also which, while usually negative in Moore-Wilton's case and not particularly welcome, was probably better than not getting any at all. I wrote to Moore-Wilton twice responding to his comments (in addition to providing the 'self-evaluation' agreed by the minister), but he did not reply either orally or in writing.

The Public Service Commissioner, Helen Williams, provided background to the assessments being made and offered helpful advice from time to time on how

best to respond to criticisms being made. Like me, however, she was not a favourite of Moore-Wilton, and she did not share his assessments of me.

During the MRI and 'kerosene baths' crises, I was also constantly warned that my future was under threat.

Table II.6 Other performance feedback or scapegoating

The 'kerosene baths' crisis was the most harrowing of personal experiences, it being made clear on a number of occasions between March and June 2000 that my own position was under threat.

Formally, of course, I could expect my performance appraisal for 1999–2000 to include consideration of the MRI and aged-care incidents in the assessment of how well I had managed the department and supported ministers. I had no doubt my performance would be rated poorly if for no other reason than that the political damage would demand that the department (and I) should carry much of the responsibility. This was not entirely fair in my view, but an inevitable result of the political framework governing the performance assessment process. I was prepared therefore for being denied any performance pay.

More worryingly, however, were the informal assessments and scuttlebutt among people with no relevant competence but considerable political influence. I mentioned earlier (Table 3.7) the advice from a key member of the PMO that 'you need a baseball bat, Andrew, to take to the department'. This was clearly an indication that some ministerial staff wanted to weigh into me too. A senior member of Wooldridge's staff warned me directly that my position was being discussed among ministerial staff, and possibly ministers, and that termination of my appointment was seriously under consideration. I responded that this was quite inappropriate and, in any case, action against me would not relieve pressure on ministers, particularly Minister Bishop. I spoke to Helen Williams, Public Service Commissioner, and decided firmly I would not resign. She kindly ensured I had information about superannuation options should I suddenly be sacked.

I also received advice in March 2000 from a senior officer in the Department of PM&C that the social policy area of that department was strongly criticising me and the department, including in communications with the PMO. This, I was told, reflected a common approach taken by that area of PM&C at the time, to work directly not only with the PMO but other ministers' offices and to infer that it could handle program management as well as policy advising better than the relevant line departments (these included education and immigration as well as health

and aged care). It was an approach others in the Department of PM&C considered inconsistent with the department's coordination role and inappropriate because it encouraged ministerial staff to contribute to matters outside their competence.

I continued as Secretary of the Health department for nearly two years after this, with my contract renewed in 2001 after Wooldridge confirmed his support for my reappointment (see Table 11.5). On his departure after the 2001 election, however, I was replaced as secretary and became Public Service Commissioner.

Changes since the 1980s

The processes of career development of secretaries have been changing with greater mobility particularly at the SES level, and with more external appointments of agency heads. While the majority of secretaries are still people with a long career in the APS, there is an increasing proportion with other lengthy experience, whether in state public services or in private or non-governmental organisations (mostly with close involvement with government). This trend is widening the background, perspectives and skill sets of secretaries.

At the same time, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the trend since the 1980s to require secretaries to be both managers and policy advisers has perhaps led to some convergence of styles and skills. There seem to be fewer mavericks or characters with highly specialist skills or individual styles (whether an Ian Castles or a Pat Lanigan—the enigmatic Director-General of Social Security in the late 1970s). Everyone is expected to be a manager today, perhaps at the cost of fewer top policy analysts among the secretaries' group.

Issues arising

A perennial issue is the balance between generalists and specialists, or each secretary's own balance between generalist and specialist skills and knowledge. There is a need for a mix among the cadre of secretaries and agency heads, but also there are risks for a secretary who is either too specialist (and lacking broad management skills or deep understanding of the processes of government and political awareness) or too generalist (and lacking essential subject content).

The increase in mobility adds weight to the Australian practice of more *laissez faire* approaches to career development. There is, however, a strong case for strengthening the investment in future leaders given the pressures on secretaries and the responsibilities they exercise. This requires careful succession management to identify those who should receive such investments. And it

suggests that those who come in laterally to secretary or other very senior positions need to have access to substantial formal and informal support.

The increase in mobility should not, however, be exaggerated. The current leadership is still dominated by individuals who joined the APS or a state public service on or shortly after graduation. That might remain the case. If so, it also remains essential that the Public Service recruits some of the best and brightest from our universities and convinces them to stay.

Successful development almost always involves on-the-job experience. Formal training, however, is increasingly important, providing a framework for applying lessons from experience to new situations and for analysing the causes of success and failure. There are serious risks, however, in the fads and fashions of management theories and training, including wasted resources on overheads and on unnecessary restructuring together with loss of credibility among staff within the agency and external stakeholders.

I believe performance pay for secretaries shifted the balance of incentives too far towards rewarding responsiveness and away from rewarding good management, leadership and the promotion of public service professionalism. There is a risk, however, in removing performance pay that feedback to secretaries will also disappear. Secretaries, like other employees, require constructive, fair, comprehensive and timely feedback on their performance. There might be an opportunity now to introduce a performance assessment process that relies more on peer review, as in Canada or New Zealand, with ministerial feedback included but not dominating. Reports could still go to the Prime Minister for noting and comments (see Chapter 12).

Lessons learned

I am acutely conscious that my career experience, while personally very rewarding, should not be seen as the model for others to try to replicate. It is my personal history, reflecting my choices, my good fortune and my own strengths and weaknesses.

What capabilities and experiences do secretaries require? I do not suggest there is a simple formula. Indeed, there is advantage to the Public Service as a whole to have a diversity of people at the top with different personalities, skill mixes, expertise and personal and career backgrounds. Nonetheless, those trying to guide career development rightly look for some balance in the mix of each secretary's experience, seeing benefits in:

- some management experience and some formal management training
- policy capacity, which remains critical for most Commonwealth departments
- some central agency experience as well as line agency experience
- some proven expertise, even if the person is now in a more generalist role.

The last is, in my view, quite important. In some cases, there remains a need for the relevant secretary to have particular subject matter expertise (for example, in the Attorney-General's Department and in Treasury). In others, the secretary might not require subject matter expertise, but must appreciate its importance to the success of the department. I was always persuaded by a comment Sir John Crawford made to a forum at The Australian National University that I attended in 1970 to the effect that the best generalist was someone who had been an expert. I also tend to favour some streaming of most top people according to areas of expertise, despite my own eclectic career. That streaming might reflect expertise in social policy, or industry, or defence and foreign affairs, or economics and financial management, or law, or large-scale management.

Whatever our own attributes, secretaries require substantial support in terms of personal staff, the agency's executive team and external networks. Cementing personal commitment and trust is essential and there are some simple rules to follow that can help.

I have highlighted the importance of retaining some form of performance feedback, primarily peer based, despite the welcome removal of performance pay. The five areas identified under the old regime remain apposite: support for the minister, support for the government as a whole, management, leadership and the APS Values. In saying this, I should also caution against too much formality in the process. With this in mind, I encourage readers to examine a Canadian paper, *Distinguishing the real from the surreal in management reform*, by two former deputy ministers (the Canadian equivalent of Australian departmental secretaries), Ian Clark and Harry Swain (2007), in which they distinguish between the duties of deputy ministers to manage people and public monies in a sensible way and duties to comply with centrally imposed requirements associated with idealised government-wide management frameworks.