

Preface



The purpose of this monograph is to provide a comprehensive description of the role of a departmental secretary today, how that role has changed, the range of issues involved in exercising that role and some lessons from my experience.

Some of my predecessors have written on aspects of the role (for example, Crawford 1954, 1970; Cooley 1974) or provided a formal enunciation of the role (for example, Codd 1990). There is also some previous academic commentary such as Spann (1976, to the Coombs Royal Commission) and Weller (2001). This account, however, is both more comprehensive and more contemplative, drawing illustrations of the full range of work involved and the

challenges faced from my personal experience. It is also, of course, more contemporary. Appendices A and B to the monograph summarise my career in the Australian Public Service from 1968 until 2005, including the departments I headed between 1993 and 2002, my time as Public Service Commissioner from 2002 to 2004 and the ministers I served.

It is written primarily for those who might be secretaries in the future and for those working closely with secretaries including ministers and ministerial staff as well as other senior public servants, with summaries of the lessons I learned that others might find helpful. In addition, I hope it is informative for a wider readership of officials at all levels and parliamentarians, academics, students of government and others who work closely with the political process such as journalists, lobbyists and senior people in business and non-governmental organisations.

The responsibilities of secretaries are substantial and even those who interact frequently with them rarely see the full picture. From time to time, some elements will hit the headlines, sometimes as a success but more often as a failure or a

scandal when responsibility is quickly sheeted home to the minister and the secretary. The wider context (including whether either the minister or the secretary was or should have been involved) and the full range of work being done are, however, rarely appreciated. Political and media judgments of performance often rest on narrow perspectives, which may or may not accurately reflect overall performance.

Government has also become more complex and ministers and senior public servants are facing greater challenges than in the past. There might be more players on the stage of national politics and public administration, and the Public Service has long lost its pre-eminent position, but this has not diminished the role and responsibilities of secretaries: indeed, it has generally added to them.

Notwithstanding the changes to the Public Service during my career, there is also much that remains substantially the same. The basic principles and values under our Westminster traditions have remained relevant. The notion of a career public service attracting and retaining some of the best and the brightest with lifetime commitment to the Australian community is still important, despite the benefits and reality of increased mobility; and wider participation in the political process has not overshadowed the important role of the Public Service. Being a departmental secretary is a particular privilege, with wonderful opportunities to influence public policy and to inspire and support public servants whose job it is to ensure the delivery of quality services to the public.

I am grateful for advice I received from a number of people, most importantly John Wanna, Pat Weller, John Nethercote, David Stanton and Helen Williams; I also received helpful comments on a late draft from the two ministers with whom I worked most closely, Brian Howe and Michael Wooldridge. My wife, Barbara, provided much more than moral support, commenting on drafts, reminding me of relevant incidents and assisting with word processing and layout.

Andrew Podger

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Photo: Andrew Podger when Secretary of the Department of Health and Aged Care (photo by kind permission of the Department of Health and Ageing).