

# The Man with a 'Promising Past' – Michael L'Estrange, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The position of Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is unusual in the bureaucracy in that the occupant is directly answerable to two very senior ministers – the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Trade. The ministers are inevitably Cabinet ministers and with the Coalition in Government, it is frequently the case that one of them is also the Deputy Prime Minister. So it is for Michael L'Estrange, who must respond to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and the Leader of the National Party, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Mark Vaile.

"We (the DFAT Executive) try to meet once a week, if not more, with both our ministers and parliamentary secretaries," he says. If Parliament is sitting, there tends to be more time over at Parliament House. L'Estrange starts his day with a run to clear his head at about 6.30 in the morning and then listen to the news. By about 8 o'clock he is in the office where, for the rest of the day, he is bombarded with a constant flow of information from all corners of the world. "Being the kind of service we are, a lot of our work is done overnight because we're operating round the world," he says. "I read the main cables that have come in overnight, the main issues in relation to policy and personnel issues and then we (senior executives) have a media meeting at 9 o'clock just to find out what is going on."

L'Estrange faces more than his fair share of meetings. In addition to the normal policy ones that any department head must deal with he meets with incoming ambassadors or those who are leaving. "I tend to meet all of them as they arrive and all of them as they leave and a lot of them in between, who come and see me about various issues," he says. "I see all of our ambassadors before they go to their posts and when they come back from their posts. And when they come back in the middle of their posts. I also obviously have to be accountable for the administration of this department. It's a significant department, about 2000 Australia-based people, about 500 overseas at any one time, about 1400 or so locally engaged staff overseas and about 88 missions overseas." The department may not be huge by corporate standards but it is complex and when state and overseas operations are considered it operates at about 100 sites in about 80 countries where it is subject to the local laws.

L'Estrange says he has not changed the processes in the department since he took over last year. "I inherited a department that worked extremely well," he

says. "I've got a lot of issues on my plate but re-creating the way the department works is not one of them because it actually works extremely well."

The interview for this article was conducted on the day it was first alleged at the Cole Inquiry into the oil-for-food scandal that DFAT was aware of kickbacks paid to the Saddam Hussein regime and the day after it was revealed that Australia's ambassador in Washington, Michael Thawley, had assured US senators that the wheat deal did not involve kickbacks. However, it was agreed that the interview would not canvass these current issues.

The first big challenge for the department L'Estrange nominates is counter terrorism, addressing the threat of global terrorism, not just in the high profile operations in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in the region. Counter proliferation of armaments is also a big concern, particularly in relation to weapons of mass destruction but also in relation to the illegal movement of small arms. "We're doing work through the UN and bi-laterally to try and reduce the level of arms. We're very focussed obviously on what is happening in terms of the relationship between the great and emerging powers in our part of the world, particularly the US, China and Japan, and what that means for us. With all of those countries we have important relationships so that's a big focus for us. Another big focus is our own relationship with regional and neighbouring countries. I think in this context we have a greater opportunity to do good things than we've had for a long, long time, particularly with countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries of ASEAN and the Pacific Island countries. In that latter context we had some big resource involvement in PNG, including the Enhanced Cooperation Program and in the Solomon Islands."

The other big things he says they are focussed on are trade issues including the DOHA Round of multilateral free trade negotiation. Regional institutions also are on the agenda. Australia is hosting APEC next year and has just been involved in the first East Asia Summit. L'Estrange says these are very important organisations for Australia to be involved with. "We are a country which has its priorities in the Asia/Pacific region but we've got global interests", he says. "So therefore we're very involved in what's happening in terms of European policy; very involved and interested in what's happening in the Middle East, very involved and active in issues like climate change."

The final big issue he nominates is the security of Australians overseas, the missions overseas and the people who work in them, and the security of Australians generally. This involves the department in such things as travel advisories, the new passport system and consular support for Australians in trouble overseas in incidents from bombs to bus crashes. L'Estrange has no career disaster stories to tell, or if he does he will not reveal them.

He remembers the first time he was sent across from PM&C to note-take for Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser at a meeting of a visiting delegation from overseas.

He was told how to get to the Prime Minister's office in the rabbit warren old Parliament House and did not want to admit that he did not know the geography. But he could not find the office. "I remember it was about 100 degrees and I was sweating profusely, marginally late when I finally found the Prime Minister's office," he says. "Thankfully the delegation was late. I remember sitting in that office thinking that this was not the way to make an impression on the Prime Minister. I don't think he noticed."

Today there is more to record keeping than note-taking and he says technology has complicated processes. "When I first joined the public service it was very much a paper dominated communications system – paper based and recorded and I think quite methodical. Now there are so many ways of communicating, electronic, telephone etc. Keeping a good track of all of this, as well as your normal cable networks and other things is a real challenge. It's a big burden and we are very much focussed on this at the moment. We've tried to address this in terms of making improvements. But technology keeps advancing on us, blackberries and everything else."

Whether emails should be kept on hard copy files depends on the email, he says. Some are chatty and personal. "I think if you kept all of them you'd have buildings all round Canberra to look after. "I think people should be keeping more ... you can actually tell the 10 or 15 per cent that don't matter. But you're never quite sure of the rest. I think we have to err on the side of caution." DFAT was addressing the email issue and insisted that people as much as possible kept to the formal channels of communications.

L'Estrange says he knows how difficult it can be to be in junior positions and says this is one of the reasons why he is very sensitive to younger people today. "I remember 25 years ago walking into a big department and even though you've done a lot of academic work, it's quite imposing," he says. "I remember from those days people like Sir Geoffrey Yeend, Ashton Calvert, Sandy Hollway. They made a big impression on me because they actually made my role feel relevant to the big things that were going on ... I do remember as a junior officer going to an inter-departmental committee at a time when whole of government was less in the public profile than it is now and turf wars were fairly strong. I was still fairly young, and given that people had been working on these technical issues for 20 years, it is quite an inhibiting thing when you put your head up and it gets chopped off and you feel a little bit reticent. So I always am very mindful of people coming into this department to make them feel that they're part of this machine."

L'Estrange says he is enjoying the job. "It is relentless and unpredictable to an extent because you are reacting to events. But at the same time there are these very clear interests that the Government wants to pursue in the long term. Some of them [like] counter terrorism and what's happening in our region and consular

are big on-going issues. But there are the ones that hit you from the side ... and we have to respond to them. It's dynamic and it's very, very challenging ... I feel I've come through a road less travelled ... to get here than other people interviewed [for this series]. But I've got no less a commitment to public service in the broad concept of the term and I've been involved with it one way or another for a long period of time. And I really enjoy the opportunity of getting back into it."

L'Estrange did not rush into his career. After an extended period of study at Sydney and Oxford universities he joined the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in Canberra in his late twenties. "You're a man with a promising past," an acquaintance told him after he returned from his stint at Oxford. "I always remembered that and thought I should make something of the future rather than the past," he says.

Today he is very much a man of the present and the future. In the media, L'Estrange has been presented as a political appointee to the position of head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He is described as "a close political ally and confidant" of the Prime Minister, John Howard, or as a Liberal Party insider and conservative intellectual. There is no question that L'Estrange has political connections and work experience. He was executive director of the conservative think tank, the Menzies Research Centre in 1995-96 and earlier worked as a senior policy advisor to Liberal Opposition leaders Andrew Peacock and John Hewson.

But while he did not take the usual diplomatic route to the top of DFAT, looking back over his career and training, few can dispute that his experience has prepared him well for the position. In PM&C in 1981 he worked in the International Division on foreign policy. After a period with the Hope Royal Commission into the Security and Intelligence Services, he won a Harkness Scholarship to Georgetown University, where his supervisor was none other than Madeleine Albright, later to become Ambassador to the United Nations and US Secretary of State.

From 1996 to 2000 he was Secretary to Cabinet and Head of the Cabinet Policy Unit, where it is said he cemented his close relationship with the Prime Minister. Certainly the term as head of the Unit did him no harm, leading to his appointment as Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom from 2000 to 2005.

The son of a Sydney GP and one of seven children who attended St Aloysius College, Milson's Point, L'Estrange and his wife Jane have five boys aged from 12 to 20. There are pressures managing the work/family balance, he says, but "it's not as bad as a lot of other people and it's part of the job ... it's quite a good discipline, otherwise I think if you wanted to, you could work 15 hours a day

seven days a week and not do the things you want to do. So you've got to prioritise and you've got to put aside time for them."

In the mid-1970s, just after John and Janette Howard had got married, they moved into a unit in Wolstonecraft next door to the L'Estranges. The young Michael knew Howard as the local member of Parliament and his father shared Howard's interest in cricket and the politics of the day. Did this make a difference in Canberra? "I knew John Howard in that context, but not particularly well," he says. Today the two are often described as having a close relationship of which L'Estrange only says has "gone on for a long time". "I worked for him for four and a half years employed by him as Secretary to Cabinet and then four and a half years in London where, because of the course of events and what was happening in the world, he visited London a lot."

L'Estrange points out that he has been working on public policy issues from his early days. His role as Secretary to Cabinet from 1996 to 2000 exposed him to a genuinely whole of government approach, not just foreign policy or trade. He says that since taking up the position of Secretary of the department he has not had any sense that he was considered an outsider. "Last year went remarkably smoothly in terms of working relationships. Although not formally an officer of the department, I was in and around it a lot over the years. In PM&C I spent all of my time working on foreign policy related issues. Certainly when I was Secretary to the Cabinet for four and a half years I had a lot of contact, directly, with the department. And obviously when I was in London for four and a half years I had an enormous amount of contact with the department. I knew most, if not all the senior people. I knew a lot of the middle people. So I don't think I was an unknown quantity. I've never felt an outsider and I don't think people perceive me as such because I believe in what the department works for. I respect the quality of the people we attract and I certainly strongly support the work they do in a lot of difficult places around the world."

In response to questions about his career and experience L'Estrange is reticent. He does not volunteer any juicy stories from his time in the Opposition leaders' offices or with the Cabinet Unit and even plays down one of the better, previously reported stories. It was said that after the Prime Minister created the new position of Cabinet Secretary and appointed L'Estrange to head it, the then Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton, asked the Unit to pay for its space in the department's offices in Barton. L'Estrange proceeded to find new accommodation – next to the Cabinet room in Parliament House and across the corridor from Howard's suite in the House. "That's just a complete beat up," L'Estrange says today.

Was Max Moore-Wilton bothered by the creation of L'Estrange's Cabinet Secretary role? "No. Not at all. In fact it worked extremely well. It does depend on personalities, I think, and it was a change. I think if you asked around for

those four and a half years it worked incredibly smoothly and he was not just a close working colleague, he's remained a good friend."

L'Estrange says Moore-Wilton is "a colourful and very effective character" and, in the period he was head of the Prime Minister's department, he was extraordinarily effective. "You know the first year it was important that, as this was a new situation in that the Secretary of Cabinet, for the first time, was not the head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, I think it was very important in the first year that there be a physical connection between the new Cabinet Policy Unit and the department. It was a new government and I think it established important linkages into the department on the ground."

As for the quality of their relationship, L'Estrange goes on to say, "I had a very close working relationship with him and I had a very good friendship with him and still do. So there's no sort of stories of bust-ups or wars there. We both respected that we had different kinds of roles although they intersected a lot. I was dealing with a lot of people in the department and I think it worked extremely well. So there was nothing really in that relationship that was difficult or strained."

L'Estrange says his time working on secondment in Opposition leaders' offices exposed him to the public policy process in a very direct way. Asked if people who take such positions pay a price when they come back to the public service, he says, "I don't think so." There are ways for people looking for a long term career in the public service to approach such jobs. "There are ways of doing them," he says. "Some jobs are more highly politicised than others in ministerial offices. People who are seconded from the public service tend to work on public policy issues in those offices which was my focus. I think most people do it that way so if they want to come back and accept the apolitical nature of the public service it's something they can do. So I think it's a matter of having an eye to the future as well as the present in terms of the way it pans out."

Asked if it makes a difference working in Parliament House for someone in Opposition rather than the Government he says, "Well I think it's obviously different because one is the Government and (it) and the public service are very closely aligned. But I think in terms of experience of the process – the parliamentary process and the public policy process – I think we certainly accept there's a place for that."

If there were any good lessons for the future from his experiences in the offices of Andrew Peacock or John Hewson, L'Estrange won't recount them. "I can't think of any one thing or anything in particular", he says. "But I think what I got out of it all was a much better understanding of the processes of the Parliament and the way the committee systems work and the way public policy evolves in terms of responsiveness to interest groups and I think in terms of serving the public interest it can be a very productive way to go."

L'Estrange was in Peacock's office during the 1990 election where he says he played "very much" a policy role. "I do think ... people from the public service who are seconded tend to focus very heavily on the policy side of things and I think they can make the transition back." While he thinks the public service is essentially a career service he says there will always be an element of lateral recruitment and this is a good thing. "It's quite old thinking to think that the only people who can contribute to public policy development are people who have spent a lifetime in the public service. They do make a very important contribution. But others can make a contribution as well. I think it's right to be a career service. It will remain a career service. But not exclusively."

On the issue of the impact of the increase in political staff in the offices in Parliament House he says that as far as his department is concerned it has not really changed the nature of the interaction with the ministers. "[W]e provide our advice to the Government in terms of how to get where it wants to go in terms of policy," he says. "There are all sorts of ways in which that can be done. That's what we're about. We're about making this place administratively efficient and capable. We're about making it dynamic in terms of policy advice, but within the very clear context of where the Government wants to go."

L'Estrange noted that DFAT contributes ideas and perspectives relevant to the Government's determination of its specific policy priorities. But once those priorities are specified, DFAT is focussed on effective and accountable implementation. "We don't contest an end of policy because the Government lays that down. We suggest ways in which the objective the Government wants to achieve can be advanced. I think that's the right and proper way to do it. Now the process of that advice is very clear and open and I don't think anything has changed in that over recent years and I think it's a very vibrant and open exchange."

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