

Pioneering Survivor – Helen Williams, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts

As head of the Public Service Board some twenty-five years ago, Bill Cole told a tale of a senior officer in his former Finance department threatening that a woman would be appointed to the second division “over his dead body”. Cole said he appointed the woman, but the senior officer did not die. The woman in question was Helen Williams, now head of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.

Williams says there was “a bit of tension” back in 1979 when she joined the second division in Finance. There had been one woman second division officer in Treasury, but she was the first in Finance. She was well aware, in particular, of the opposition from the division head who went on to make Williams’ life extremely difficult. “In those days, if you wanted increased staff you had to put a case to the Public Service Board,” she says. “I was in charge of the social security branch and I think I had about five or six staff and I put up a case for an increase. I found out, when my division head was away, and there had been no response from the Board, that he’d actually told the Board not to take any notice it. I sent them a separate case and got the additional staff.”

“At another stage he told me to fill in daily sheets showing what work had been done and the time I had spent on it.” Williams filled out the reports until she bumped into the then head of her department, Ian Castles, at a departmental happy hour. “He asked me what the sheets were and, when I explained, said simply, ‘why do you do it?’. I went to see the division head and said, ‘Look, this is silly. It’s a waste of my time’, and the process was quietly dropped.” Williams said she had not thought of going to Castles, or one of the deputies, to talk about it. “I tended to grit my teeth and think I will last this out. I learned through that experience.”

Williams has been in the top rank of the public service for twenty years now. Before Peter Shergold, the current head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, had even joined the public service, Williams was a department head. She joined the service in 1970 under the old Public Service Board administrative trainee scheme. Both her parents were academics, her father, Sir Bruce Williams, was Vice Chancellor of Sydney University and her mother, Roma Williams, had lectured in economics.

“I started to do a further degree and realised this wasn’t going to be my future,” she says. “I didn’t like lecturing. I’m still not a good public speaker. And I decided to come to the public service to give myself a year to think about what

I really wanted to do." In her first year she had a major car accident and spent four months in Canberra Hospital. "I came out shaken and on crutches, and the Board decided to send me to Treasury as a place that required the least physical mobility." The car had crushed Williams, smashing both her legs, creating a condition known as a fat embolism where the bone marrow in her legs got into her blood stream and blocked the circulation to her lungs. "I was a write-off. I was very lucky there was a trauma team in Canberra Hospital that was researching ways to counter this kind of situation and they quite literally used me to experiment and brought me through."

Williams was in Treasury before it split into the two agencies of Treasury and Finance and she moved to Finance after the split. She worked mostly in the social security stream but also spent time on education and superannuation and rose to a level equivalent to the current Band Two. On the change of Government in 1983 she got a call from Dr Peter Wilenski who was the head of the Education department. He was a great supporter of women at senior levels of the service and asked Williams to apply for a deputy secretary position. "I think he was just increasing the number of women in the field," she says. "I don't think he, or I, expected me to get the job. But it's interesting to think back on how the representation of women has changed. Although the statutory authorities had more senior women, for example Marie Coleman was appointed head of the Social Welfare Commission in the early seventies, that was the first time a woman had reached a deputy secretary in a government department."

Williams says another example of the way things have changed is the attitude of the education community at the time to her appointment. "There was a real tension in the academic/education community about bringing somebody in from Treasury/Finance rather than an educationalist. Several articles were written at the time attacking the move." Even though Williams had a history/sociology background, the educationalists were very firmly of the view that she was a Treasury/Finance import. The economic rationalist debate had yet to gather steam, but she thinks there was an understanding that that was the way things were moving, and the educationalists did not like it. However, she says, it did not take long until she was accepted.

In 1985 she was appointed Secretary of Education. At that stage, she says the educational hierarchy in the states was very strong, particularly at the schools level. The state directors-general objected to any interference from the Commonwealth, or even from their own political leaders. "One of our tasks, in line with Labor's election policy, was to negotiate resource agreements for the general recurrent schools grants with both the states and the non-government systems. It was not easy because before that they got a free ride." Although the Commonwealth had the carrot of funding, the states had previously received the money without conditions. The Commonwealth Government now wanted a

focus on its own priorities and some data on performance in meeting them as a condition of funding. Agreements were negotiated with the non-government systems, but the directors-general held out even though the priorities were not very different to those they already had.

Eventually the minister, Senator Susan Ryan, took the matter to the political level and achieved agreement. “I well remember the next Commonwealth-state officials meeting,” Williams says. “I was given a very hard time because I’d allowed this to go to the political level when the directors-general had stated clearly that this wasn’t going to happen ... in those days their firm view was that politicians should not interfere in their territory.”

The Labor Government also moved the big funding programs for schools from the Schools Commission back to core government. Because the programs were very important to the Catholic systems, one or two of the Labor ministers were concerned about moving these programs into a department headed by a non-Catholic. It was the era of the campaign against state aid for independent schools and Williams says she was taken to Sydney to be vetted by the Catholic hierarchy. Although she had a Methodist background she got on extremely well with them and admired the Catholic school systems. “They were very efficient bureaucracies,” she says.

Perhaps more surprising than the job discrimination and the religious concerns was the reaction to Secretary Williams’ decision at the beginning of 1987 to take six months maternity leave. “That caused a considerable reaction both from the senior bureaucracy and from the women’s groups,” she says. “Both areas believed I’d let them down.” Some of the women’s groups believed she had been given a chance at a top job and should have either kept working or not had the baby. “I can understand their reaction,” she says. “But it’s one of those life choices you have to make.”

While she was away, the head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Mike Codd, completed a reorganisation of the 28 departments, cutting them down to 18. “The day I came back from maternity leave was the day that the change was instituted and not surprisingly I was not one of those that got a department. I became one of the 10 or so Associate Secretaries.” Williams was an associate secretary for five years. Half way through that period, Codd rang her and offered her the choice between running a particular agency and heading the secretariat of the Hawke Government’s New Federalism exercise. “In my time in Education I’d seen at first hand the tensions and inefficiencies between the Commonwealth and the states and I was really attracted to the idea of trying to sort that out. So I chose the Hawke New Federalism exercise and I worked on that for the next three years.”

The first Special Premiers’ Conferences were a real success and there were some early gains. The particular group of premiers, led by the Premier of NSW, Nick

Greiner, wanted change and initially it looked as though that potential was going to be achieved. But the problem was funding. This was before the GST was brought in and the vertical fiscal imbalance between the Commonwealth and the states was the big issue. There was considerable concern at the Commonwealth level about giving up some of its funding power and Williams says this became a focus of the tensions between Hawke and Keating over the prime ministership. Ultimately the exercise stalled. But it remains an issue of real interest to her.

Williams says that one thing that has changed for the better over the years is the increased collegiality across the service and the positive encouragement to talk through issues of concern. "When I took over Education it had an extraordinarily low resource base ... we really were fighting to achieve the change that was necessary. It didn't occur to me to talk to the head of PM&C about the problems we were facing or to make them more widely known. I think it's more generally accepted these days that, if you have a problem, you should talk to a senior manager."

She says all departments at some stage will have difficult inter-personal relationships. "I make it clear that I have an open door and people do come and talk to me about a range of problems, although I can understand some people are a bit hesitant to do so. But this is a general policy across the agency. I think the important thing is to make it clear that, if you have got a problem, there are systems to work the issue through." Williams does not favour moving people to overcome inter-personal problems in all but really difficult cases. "If there's a problem there's usually a way through it. It may be a case of insensitivity or unreal expectations on either side. It's important to work through the issues and consider possible solutions."

DCITA does not have a formal mobility scheme and Williams says "They can be too directive and I've suffered from these in the past myself. But I do positively encourage people to move to broaden their expertise." The other side of increasing mobility is the common complaint from outsiders that they never deal with the same public servant two weeks in a row. Williams says there is a line between being in a job long enough to have developed worthwhile experience and networks, and being there so long that one is stale. There are also ways of increasing experience through formal development activities or the addition of cross-agency responsibilities. "But I do believe that too frequent change is not good for an organisation. There is a real danger of losing essential expertise. I think that three or four, perhaps five, years is probably a good time in any one position. But often that depends on the particular person and the particular job. Some people go into a position with relevant experience and can hit the ground running. Others require time to develop new skills. But I don't believe, particularly at Secretary level, constant moves are helpful. It takes a

while to get across the range of issues dealt with by a portfolio, particularly one where you've had no previous experience."

The public service has changed dramatically since Williams first became a secretary in 1985. Although she was personally disadvantaged by the major amalgamation of departments the Hawke Government implemented in 1987, she applauds the move. Williams, who was head of one of the existing 28 departments, Education, found herself sidelined as an associate secretary and had to work her way back to lead a full department again. By 1993 she was head of the boutique Department of Tourism and at the change of government was appointed to lead Immigration and Multicultural Affairs under minister Philip Ruddock.

There are few people today better placed to have observed the changes in the service over the last twenty years. Williams held key, central positions and took over the role of Public Service Commissioner in 1998, following Dr Peter Shergold, the current head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. As Commissioner she was able to continue the reforms Shergold had started. In 1985 when there were 28 departments she says there were fewer linkages across government. "There were constant administrative orders changes and it really was a major problem for stability and efficiency. "You may remember the cartoons every time there was a change in government, or Prime Minister. Significant parts of departments used to pack up everything and move to a new agency. Since the 1987 amalgamations there have been minor changes to portfolios but they really have been remarkably stable since that time."

In 1985, she says, departments' policy advice was less contested. The growth in contestable sources of advice from think tanks, ministers' offices and consultants had not really taken off. In addition, the departments were less complex than today and central agency control, be it Finance or the Public Service Board, was "very much greater". As a result the management role of secretaries and their accountability was less significant. "If every time you wanted a change in departmental structures you had to go to the Public Service Board, you had less flexibility and less ability to be efficient and innovative," she says. "But you could also blame the Board if you didn't get what you believed you needed to do the job."

Finance and budgeting were also very different. "In those days you had to submit annual budget bids for each program item and had little ability to shift funds between program elements or years. So you didn't have the forward planning ability or the flexibility that you have today. The financial and personnel management changes since that time were driven by the public service itself, much of it under the aegis of the former Management Advisory Board."

In 1998, after having been Secretary of three departments and having headed the Commonwealth-State Relations Secretariat, Williams was appointed Public

Service Commissioner. “The main issue we faced was putting in place the new Public Service Act which represented a very major change in the way the departments were managed,” she says. “Peter [Shergold] had done most of the ground work on the Act but we still had to negotiate it with the unions and support the minister, David Kemp, in negotiating it with the Opposition. David Kemp was really an ideal minister for that because he had a very good intellectual framework for the interaction between government and the public service. It was quite a long negotiation but eventually the Act was passed with bipartisan support.”

“We went from an Act of about 300 pages full of very detailed prescriptions and regulations to an Act of about 45 pages which really just outlined the employment framework and set out the Public Service Values for the first time in legislation. It was based on devolution of power to agencies, but far greater accountability for the use of that power. In a way that’s a far more difficult thing to manage than to operate within the safety of rules and regulations. But it also provided more flexibility, more potential for innovation and was a far more efficient system. It does put a lot more responsibility on the leaders of the service – and I’m talking here not only about secretaries but about people in the SES and even the executive levels of the service – to lead by example.” She says the values were a careful balance between the need to be responsive to the Government-of-the-day and the apolitical professionalism of the public service.

Today, heading Communication, Information Technology and the Arts, Williams says she has “a fascinating portfolio”. “I’ve enjoyed all my jobs but I have to say this one is particularly interesting, partly because of the diversity of the department. It has a broad range from the communications areas of telecommunications, broadcasting, ICT and the information economy, through to arts and culture and of course to sports.”

In addition to the department, the portfolio has 21 other agencies. Williams says there is an increasing synergy across the tasks they undertake, starting with increasing convergence between the traditional communications areas of telecommunications, broadcasting and ICT which affects both regulation and market structures. For example, “you can now get the traditional broadcasting content on 3G mobile, or on computer via broadband. The old distinctions are increasingly obsolete and that impacts not only on policy advice but on the structure of the department. We’re currently work-shopping ways to re-structure the department based on the more relevant divisions of content, carriage, and access.”

The program load of the department has also increased significantly. DCITA is preparing to implement the \$1.1 billion Connect Australia programs to increase communications in regional Australia in preparation for a possible final sale of Telstra. “That is a very major focus for the department next year. And, it’s quite

a test for us because the Government is focussing more and more on successful program implementation – getting results for the money it's putting into programs. The more expertise we can build in program management the more successful we will be. In fact increasing expertise generally is a core issue for all secretaries."

In the re-organisation, Williams plans to spread the programs across divisions to help build that expertise throughout the department. This will mean that coordinating mechanisms are particularly important to make sure that staff are aware of the overall picture. "The diversity of the areas we deal with, but also the synergies, mean that coordination across the department is a real priority," she says. "The important thing is to ensure that those mechanisms have their use-by date and don't go on after that date is reached."

On the synergies, she says that the growing importance of content to the future of communications generally means that the arts and culture side of the department is increasingly relevant to the communications side. This is particularly true of film and digital content. It is also relevant to sport as access to the various sports is obviously crucial to their financial position. "So the synergies are becoming more and more important in what seems at first to be a very diverse portfolio," she says.

Among the challenges Williams nominates for the department is the finalisation of the regulatory environment to give regulatory certainty for the Government's decision on the full sale of Telstra. "There are also some very big issues in the media field including the move to digital television and radio and the new triennium for the national broadcasters," she says. "In the sports area, we are in the closing stages of setting up the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Agency, and of course the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games are now very close."

DCITA coordinates the Australian Government input into the Games. She says there are some major issues with the states over funding for the arts and culture. She gives as examples the sustainability of the orchestral sector and depreciation funding for the national collecting institutions, the Library, the Gallery, the Museum, and the Maritime Museum. Williams says the diversity is "part of the buzz" she gets from the portfolio.

The Secretary plays a key coordination role in the portfolio as well as the department. But unlike some department heads she does not have meetings of all 21 agency heads within the portfolio. "I don't think you would get senior people, say in Telstra, coming along on an ongoing basis to talk about arts funding," she says. But the heads of the cultural organisations do meet as a group and this group includes the ABC and SBS and the Australian Communications and Media Authority. "Every so often we also invite the sports agencies along to talk about particular issues. So we try and get as many of the portfolio agencies together as we can."

The meetings' agendas can range from specific funding or management issues to the contribution arts and culture can make to the economy and to the country's identity. "We also have regular meetings with the communications regulatory agencies, not only the Australian Communications and Media Authority, which is in this portfolio, but the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission."

Within the department, a regular weekly division heads meeting is held on Monday, exchanging information on what is happening in each of the areas, and considering management issues such as recruitment or occupational health and safety. There is also a monthly meeting of the executive group, consisting of Williams and her deputies, to discuss high-level issues arising for the department as a whole.

Contact with the ministers' offices is a priority. "One of our tasks is to ensure that there is an ongoing exchange of information so that the office and the department are aware of the other issues and concerns," she says. "That's immensely important." She observes that different ministers operate in different ways. "Some of them will pick up the phone whenever there's an issue. Others prefer face to face meetings. It will often depend on what the issues are."

It is also crucial to understand ministers' agendas to provide them with the best support. When a new government comes in, she says there is usually a well worked through policy platform. As governments are in power for any length of time, that agenda is revised and updated and the public service can provide very important assistance in that updating. "I can remember the then head of the British Cabinet Office telling me that when the Blair Government came in, it was extraordinarily impressed with the civil service because it had studied the Blair agenda, knew what to do to implement it and moved quickly to do so. Once that agenda needed revision, the Blair Government started to question why the process had stalled and the relationship started to falter. I think the lesson is that the Government and the public service must work together actively on policy development or the overall product suffers."

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