

Foreword

It is a noteworthy indicator of change in a public service that it is now possible for a journalist, with official sanction, to write profiles of departmental secretaries based on interviews. Until the mid-1960s department heads were rarely mentioned in the media. An attempt in the immediate post-Menzies era to profile secretaries ended in grief after only two interviews.

In the end, the attempt was not entirely futile for, in subsequent years, journalists became adept in covering bureaucracy. In Australia, *the Canberra Times* led the way with a succession of highly skilled reporters on the *public service round*. The unlikely pathfinder was the irascible Bruce Juddery. The first great story revolved around the controversy over use of the VIP flight in the RAAF during the last months of the Holt Government. It was followed hard apace by newly-installed Prime Minister John Gorton's removal, early in 1968, of Sir John Bunting from the post of Secretary, Prime Minister's Department. The *round* was rewarded with especially rich pickings in the days of the McMahon Government and the temperamental, erratic Whitlam prime ministership.

The baton is now in the hands of Paul Malone, author of this monograph. Malone is very well equipped for this assignment. His career in journalism includes 12 years working in the Press Gallery (five as political correspondent and bureau chief for *the Canberra Times*, the rest for the *Financial Review* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*). He has also seen bureaucracy from the inside, as a departmental officer and as a ministerial staffer.

These profiles show that while most of those who reach to top of the public service come from the career service, it is now probable that they will have had a range of experience elsewhere, often in a university, very occasionally in commerce. This experience might come at the start of a career or during a short break after some advancement up the ladder.

In many respects the secretary cadre is very diverse; at around 20 in number it can hardly hope to be representative of the entire nation. They come from all states and Territories, except Tasmania and the Northern Territory, with Victoria predominating, and from abroad. For Peter Shergold, arriving in Australia in his 20s, the route to Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, was probably more assured than had he entered Whitehall, aspiring to head the British Cabinet Office. Three of the group covered in this book have had no post in Australian Government except as departmental secretaries. All have university qualifications, gained, with one exception, full-time. Most have second degrees, in five cases at doctoral level.

A number have combined experience in Canberra with periods abroad, usually but not entirely in Western Europe or North America, or both. Apart from the three recruited directly as department secretaries, public service experience in Australia outside Canberra is unusual but not entirely absent. Regional experience is obviously not obligatory in the climb to the top.

For a public service based on merit, the collective portrait contained in this book will be reassuring. But it should not be entirely so. It is replete with many views, especially on work-life balance, which will be well-received and perceived as progressive. But there are other matters which show that, beyond the jargon, older bureaucratic instincts and insecurities are far from absent, though sometimes with good reason.

In his introduction, Paul Malone comments on the preponderance of training in economics among the secretaries and revives the debate about economic rationalism promoted a decade or so ago by sociologist Michael Pusey. It is not surprising that economics training should figure so prominently. Walter Bagehot described economics as the "science of business". It is also a "science of government". It is a logical course of study for someone wanting a career in government; and it is not surprising that people with training in economics should subsequently seek a career in government service.

Malone worries that so restricted a disciplinary background could too easily lead to "group think" within government. There are indeed disturbing signs of "group think" in the profiles, but its source does not necessarily lie in disciplinary background.

If anything, the secretaries protest too much about the collegiality and cooperativeness of their whole-of-government endeavours in contrast to what they see as great turf wars of earlier generations. They may be right that the environment has changed, and Malone may be partly right in attributing it to encroaching disciplinary homogeneity, but other explanations are possible. The post-1987 departmental machinery of government structure, based on comprehensive, rather than specialist, departments is a key conditioning factor. It ranks as one of the most significant administrative changes in the Commonwealth during the late twentieth century.

Effective eviction of posts previously held by engineers and other specialists has removed some tough, dogmatic participants from policy debates at the highest levels. Sol Trujillo, at Telstra, is their heir. Furthermore, the great debates which marked the Keynesian era have been settled, largely in favour of economists, certainly insofar as government intervention in (as opposed to regulation of) the economy and the scale and scope of the welfare state are concerned.

This monograph is always interesting and, for anyone seeking to gain a feel for the character and nature of life at the top, it is well recommended. It raises plenty of issues for discussion – sometimes by its virtual silence – from politicisation and accountability to management and staff relations.

J. R. Nethercote
Canberra, Australia
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