

# Prologue: Steady hands needed for turbulent times – the DFAT secretaries 1979–99

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Foreign ministries the world over have many similar features, but they all differ significantly in their operational and staffing needs from their domestic ministry counterparts. Their essential work is the management of all aspects of bilateral relations between countries; they are also deeply involved in the activities of multilateral organisations and are routinely called upon to respond to unpredictable international events over which they have little or no control. At the high policy level, the subject matter of their work ranges from trade and security to human rights and the environment. For most of these pursuits, foreign ministries function according to international rules that are often also the subject of domestic laws to enforce them. At the other end of their responsibilities are the travel-related consular and passport services so much in demand in this age of globalisation. In this period, international events assumed much greater immediacy for domestic policy-makers, thanks mainly to the enormous improvements in communications which brought international events into the home more than ever before. For a variety of reasons, therefore, those running diplomacy need to be keenly aware of both the international environment in which they operate as well as domestic circumstances and implications. Presiding over the institution that manages a country's international relations on a daily basis is, therefore, no small task.

As an earlier review of the challenges for reforming Australia's foreign service acknowledged,<sup>1</sup> operationally, striking a balance between these sometimes competing interests requires particular judgment and finesse on a day-to-day basis. Ensuring that administrative systems, communications infrastructure and personnel practices (recruiting, training, postings) meet the needs of such a diverse and unpredictable agenda calls for longer-term vision, steadiness of direction and commitment to outcomes. Also, educating and informing other affected parties, whether at home or abroad, is critically important. Instant communications has meant more, not less, pressure on the system, its employees and, above all, its managers. In many respects, higher levels of probity, a greater degree of accountability and much more transparency have come to be the hallmark of most Australian government agencies and Australia's foreign service has not been exempt from this trend.

The position of secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is a senior position in the Australian Public Service. With a staff (including overseas staff) numbering around 3,500 in 2007, it is a middle-sized department (for comparison, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has 4,200, while Treasury only has 921). Appendix 1 summarises the changes in staff numbers and the breakdown in types of staff over this period. The number of Australia-based staff which initially declined, subsequently increased as security concerns developed world-wide, but the number of locally engaged staff — critical for the operations of overseas missions — declined by around 25 per cent as part of ongoing budgetary constraints. Despite its increasingly well-known responsibilities for passports and consular services, DFAT is not primarily a ‘client service’ department with the special demands that these departments make of staff. Nevertheless, being secretary of this department — with its multi-faceted operations, demanding time-sensitive response requirements and its manifestation of complex and sometimes contradictory national interests — is by any measure a challenging job.

If anything, the extent of change that occurred within DFAT during the period 1979–99 is somewhat understated in the following chapters. In 1979, the Department of Foreign Affairs was not very different from what it had always been: an organisation with a strong distinctive view of itself as being rather different from the rest of the Australian Public Service (APS) in its commitment to a ‘higher’ plane of international relations based on commonly accepted and inviolable rules and procedures.

Then, in 1987, as part of an industrial agreement, the long-established specialised ‘streams’ among DFAT staff (diplomatic versus consular and administrative staff) were notionally abolished. Within the department, the designation of DFAT officers as ‘Foreign Affairs Officers’ was abandoned as DFAT personnel were fully integrated into the APS, sharing the same administrative designations and working conditions as the rest of the APS. Moreover, given DFAT’s reputation for being hierarchical, with discriminatory internal career paths, it only adjusted with difficulty to the public service reforms introduced by the Hawke Labor Government from 1983 that called for greater delegation of decision-making, more openness and greater fairness in working conditions and recruitment throughout the service. Initially, DFAT had grown considerably from the 1970s, taking on new responsibilities against a background of significant cultural change in the public sector, but by 2000 its numbers had reduced to 8 per cent below the level of 1980. While in absolute terms its budget had trebled, its outlays fell as a proportion of government outlays from 1.99 per cent to 1.22 per cent (see Appendix 1).

Specifically, the decade 1982–92 was a period of intense and relentless public stress for DFAT management, in which successive secretaries were deeply

involved. A series of ‘whistleblower’ allegations of corruption, mismanagement and poor morale prompted a major inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration.<sup>2</sup> At the time, departmental leadership was absorbed in repeated efforts to exorcise these demons that, on the one hand, often smeared their personal reputations and, on the other, cast a damaging pall over the department’s personnel management. The passage of time seems to have dulled the memory of how trying these events were for particular DFAT secretaries. In the words of the Senate Committee: ‘the cultural change in DFAT (from reliance on personal relationships to the use of more formal management systems) ... must have added considerably to the stress experienced by many officers and the Department as a whole.’

While the findings of the Senate Committee inquiry essentially vindicated the leadership of the Department, which had done ‘as well as could be expected,’ the Committee noted that:

DFAT did not manage aspects of the process of change in a satisfactory manner ... However, it is clear that the changes have been large and rapid and DFAT must be given credit for the progress it has made (Senate 1992: 155).

Essentially, the inquiry found some signs of ‘systemic management failure’ but said the department had generally performed satisfactorily and insisted that its criticisms ‘did not go to any major aspect of the Department’s management and operations’ (Senate 1992:156). It did, however, call for renewed efforts by DFAT management to achieve better levels of accountability, transparency and fairness, and identified 37 ‘housekeeping areas’ where it recommended improvements be made. However, a minority report submitted by Liberal Party members of the committee questioned whether DFAT had really resolved many of the issues satisfactorily and sought further evidence that it was in fact managing its operations effectively.

One of the underlying challenges for DFAT secretaries then, and ever since, was the extent to which the department needed specialised staff in areas such as trade policy, public information, international law, economics and country experts. While successive secretaries argued the case for the greater flexibility that multi-skilling delivered, in later years the value of retaining substantial specialist expertise came to be recognised. ‘Specialist’ skills included language skills which the department traditionally fostered in Australian diplomats, yet the only former language officer to become secretary of the department was Dr Ashton Calvert, who was appointed in 1998. In sum, no secretary of DFAT could ignore the need for staff who were able to operate effectively and in Australia’s interests at the intersection of cultures.

By any measure, the changes to the organisational culture and structure of DFAT between 1980 and 2000 were dramatic. Some of these changes were those that occurred within the APS as a whole, such as performance management and performance pay, but there were additional changes — internal and external — that affected Foreign Affairs specifically. By 1999, for example, DFAT staff were promoted and remunerated in the same way as their peers in other departments; any distinctive ‘foreign service’ features had gone. Symbolic of this enormous shift, their separate and strongly representative staff association (which had always dealt with management alongside the traditional unions) had been disbanded, to be replaced, eventually, by a loosely organised association with a small membership, no formal industrial negotiating role and little profile.<sup>3</sup> By the early 1990s, DFAT SES members were, like their counterparts in all other departments, employed on Australian Workplace Agreements (which were individually signed but collectively negotiated agreements) while the remainder of the staff were on a collectively negotiated Certified Agreement, in line with the practice in other APS departments, which was a significant change.

Without a doubt the most significant event affecting departmental culture was the promulgation in 1987 of changed Administrative Arrangements that brought 490 new staff with different backgrounds and responsibilities into the department from the former Department of Trade and from the Australian Information Service.<sup>4</sup> It was no small shock for staff to find themselves working closely alongside public servants from different backgrounds who, at first, even used a different computer network, and considerable departmental leadership was required for some period to communicate loudly, clearly and consistently that a new approach to their work was expected. Organisationally, many staff found themselves in the same work unit as people hailing from another organisation, although some more technical trade negotiators, for example, remained in much the same structure as before. These differing approaches were deliberate, as it was felt that all staff had to be challenged to pursue more sophisticated policy-making while valuable technical skills (in multilateral trade negotiation, for example) should not be lost. The secretaries concerned took both a cautious yet radical line to ensure that more integrated policy formulation occurred. Interestingly, most staff responded extremely well and surprised the departmental executive by requesting a deeper integration of staff within a few months. Before long, many staff sought to cross over into new work.

This major reorganisation was not a ‘world first’. In 1983, Canada had created a Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.<sup>5</sup> More cooperative, complex policies better attuned to the needs of the times were soon to emerge from Canberra as well and, in time, it was also realised that leaving the Australian Trade Commission and the Export Finance Insurance Corporation initially in other portfolios was an incomplete arrangement. Yet the Australian experiment was quickly deemed successful, was eventually recognised as something that

should not be reversed, and went on to be copied by several other countries. For the DFAT secretary, one of the challenging aspects of the amalgamated department was the parallel requirement for the secretary to serve two ministers who would not always enjoy entirely harmonious relationships nor always present departmental staff with fully synchronised tasking. In this dual role, DFAT secretaries are to this day called upon to exercise more than the usual amount of political discretion, mostly without problems ever becoming apparent.

The other area of major transforming change for Foreign Affairs, occurring roughly at the same time (1985–90), was in telecommunications technology. Telecommunications had always been a central feature of the department's operations which included formal responsibility for the government's overseas communications. All the secretaries contributing to this publication showed leadership and considerable readiness to take risks in adopting new communications technology that would significantly transform the nature of the department's daily operations. Reports and information that had previously taken time to reach the department were now available in real time and almost immediately. This transformed ministerial, management and public expectations of government reaction times and added to the burden on DFAT staff for immediate responses. It may have also contributed to the eventual shift away from medium-term policy planning. But DFAT's performance in this area of modern telecommunications, even though it did not meet all the targets set, was very credible in comparison with other foreign services. (As late as 2000, in some overseas posts DFAT telecommunications capabilities were ahead of the US State Department.)

Reviewing the recollections of the DFAT secretaries in this publication, however, one is also struck by what the DFAT secretary is and what they are not. In their authoritative *Making of Australian Foreign Policy*, Alan Gyngell and Michael Wesley comment on the considerable authority enjoyed by the DFAT secretary, but in fact give few examples of how this power might have been exercised. In fact, the DFAT secretary's authority in the period under consideration — from 1979 to 1998 — was considerably less than it might have been in the past. The main reason for this is the reassertion of ministerial control that accompanied the Hawke Government's 1983 reforms of the public service and administrative arrangements. Since then, there has been no doubt that the minister exercised the final authority and that even many administrative matters formally within the jurisdiction of the secretary, could not be decided by him without consultation with the minister.

The secretary of DFAT is more like a CEO of an organisation where many key decisions are made above him. Crucial in performing the job is giving operational direction and purpose to the organisation and its staff. This does not come from the minister or any other person. But the secretary of DFAT cannot be across all

the detail of running the department. For example, the challenge of managing the financial accounting — with so many remote branches and in multiple currencies — is obviously great. It is not surprising that DFAT was one of the first departments to appoint a professional chief finance officer from outside the department.

Changes in the *Public Service Act* in 1976 had also affected the manner in which secretaries of departments were appointed. These replaced a simple procedure for appointment by the Governor-General with a selection committee conducted by the Chairman of the Public Service Board (PSB) to advise the Prime Minister so that he could make a recommendation to the Governor-General. Peter Henderson was among the first to be appointed under this new procedure. When Henderson was replaced by Stuart Harris in 1984, a greatly streamlined process required the Prime Minister to receive a report from the Chairman of the PSB which would be the basis for a recommendation to the Governor-General. Following the abolition of the PSB in 1987, this advisory role was transferred to the secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. By the time of the 1999 amendment of the *Public Service Act*, the appointment of secretaries had become the responsibility of the Prime Minister himself, not the Governor-General. In this period as well, governments assumed greater latitude in setting the remuneration and other employment conditions of departmental heads, with the Remuneration Tribunal's role shifting from one of determination to advice. One result was a greater mix in the remuneration package between salary and other items, with superannuation allocations becoming increasingly popular.

Until the 1970s, there was no formal provision or standard practice for the termination of the appointment of a departmental secretary. Before that, the principal means of replacing an 'unwanted' departmental head was the device of abolishing the whole department. However, the 1984 changes included a removal process and were accompanied by a new policy that appointments would be reviewed at five-yearly intervals. The new arrangements included provision for compensation in the event of early termination. By the 1990s, significant performance pay provisions for departmental secretaries had been introduced. The consequence of all these changes is that, today, the secretary of DFAT along with his counterparts in the APS can be removed much more readily than in the past. The position, however, is much more generously remunerated, although certainly not on the scale of CEOs of business organisations of a comparable size and with a comparable budget to manage.

Parallel with these changes were the obligations that secretaries assumed under the new *Financial Administration Act* of 1997 that reinforced their long-standing responsibilities for managing their department's finances. Secretaries assumed additional financial responsibilities from those previously carried out by the

Treasury and, later, the Department of Finance or the Public Service Board (before its abolition). However, secretaries also enjoyed considerable latitude in how they carried out their responsibilities. Although there was considerable devolution of responsibility, the corollary of this was potentially more searching accountability. One result was a much greater level of parliamentary scrutiny of departmental administration following growth of the Senate Committee system since 1970 and the House of Representatives committee system established in 1987. Hand in hand with these changes was a broader remit for the Auditor-General, under new audit legislation.

Most of the expansion of the management role of departmental secretaries occurred in the period covered by this publication. This represented a transformation of the position, without in any way diminishing the secretary's obligations for providing advice on policy and overseeing the formulation of that advice. As a result, the modern secretary has more diverse responsibilities, considerable latitude in the way departmental staff are organised, as well as a wider range of relationships outside the department. Above all, secretaries have a higher requirement for accountability on all matters to their ministers.

Some matters always remained outside the secretary's control, such as the terms and conditions of employment determined by the Public Service Board (even if there was some discretion over salaries within the agreed budget). Employment conditions for departmental staff, whether overseas or in Australia, were the same as those that applied to staff from all departments. Some 'Heads of Mission' appointments were decided by the minister — or even the Prime Minister. The selection of deputy secretaries and first assistant secretaries, previously decided by selection processes within the department (subject to appeal), became the responsibility for selection panels including representatives from other departments, as is the case elsewhere in the public service.

Following the establishment of the Office of National Assessments (ONA) in 1977, moreover, DFAT was no longer the sole arbiter and judge of assessing political and economic developments in other countries, as they had been in the past. Significantly, ONA reports directly to the Prime Minister but DFAT only has input into, yet limited influence over, its assessments. Initially, ONA was staffed by many DFAT officers on secondment and has itself only ever been headed by former DFAT senior officers but, as time passed, many of the ex-DFAT staff did not return. A consequence of this was that ONA gradually built up its own, sometimes formidable, areas of expertise, which DFAT also once had but gradually, and perceptibly, lost. Moreover, DFAT's in-house analytical skills were also noticeably reduced as a long-term result of the assessment responsibility moving to ONA. Understandably, in these circumstances successive DFAT secretaries sought to re-emphasise DFAT's role in policy formulation, but this

coincided with the appearance of new Australian policy implementers, such as the Department of Education, on Australia's international stage.

Similarly, as the public service was increasingly called on to respond to immediate issues of the day, as global communications became more 'instant', longer-term policy development that was in the 1960s and 1970s a matter of departmental pride, also suffered, to be officially abolished in the 1990s. Instead, the department found itself spending much larger proportion of its time and resources on consular matters, which became a topic of much greater media interest from the 1980s. This, along with the responsibility for passport issue (which DFAT had taken over from the Department of Immigration in 1974), transformed the department into much more of a service agency than an organisation focused largely on issues of high policy.

Little attention is given in the former secretaries' presentations to the challenges they faced in cutting staff, yet these were among the more difficult issues they faced throughout this period, especially as DFAT often seemed to have 'no friend in court' in cabinet (or the Expenditure Review Committee) when it came to defending the department's budget. So decisions to cut policy planning altogether or to expand consular and passport operations significantly were pragmatic decisions taken by secretaries reflecting the demands of the day, under never-ending resource pressures, and did not necessarily reflect ideal outcomes for secretaries with strong commitments to the department.

Over the years, the consistent appointment of DFAT secretaries from within the ranks of the department would have contributed emphatically to preservation of the departmental professionalism, if not its former culture (this is consistent with the practice in most other countries, where the concept of a distinct 'foreign service' is also much stronger). Only two complete outsiders have been appointed as secretary of DFAT: Stuart Harris, who had served previously as Deputy Secretary of Trade; and, in 2004, Michael L'Estrange, who had worked in the international division of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and was an outside appointee as High Commissioner to the UK. This contrasts markedly with other APS departments, where 'outside' appointments are much more common. Moreover, some senior DFAT officers have been appointed heads of other departments and agencies; this happened occasionally from the 1960s but more frequently from the mid-1990s,<sup>6</sup> but the reverse movement has not happened. It is curious that in the 20 years 1987–2007, there were only two ministers for Foreign Affairs while there have been seven secretaries of the department. Only one secretary in these two decades, Ashton Calvert, was appointed for a second term. Calvert was the only secretary of Foreign Affairs since Arthur Tange (1954–65) to serve for more than five years. Other than Tange, only Hodgson (1935–45) served for such a long term.

Traditionally, DFAT staff had been seconded to other departments (and sometimes the private sector, as in the case of Peter Henderson) and this broadened their experience, helped their networking and refreshed DFAT's own knowledge and expertise. As career mobility generally increased, secondments tended to disappear in the period from the mid-1980s. DFAT staff still moved to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Prime Minister's Office and vice versa. In this sense, DFAT became somewhat less 'isolated' than before, although in the late 1990s and thereafter this was partially compensated for by the increase in 'lateral recruitment'. However, even after the 1987 integration of trade staff into the department, there were no formal staff exchanges with Austrade and little or no mobility between the two organisations. Nor was there ever much movement between DFAT and AusAID, even though, arguably, development assistance expertise would be valuable in certain areas of DFAT policy implementation.

One phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s was the increasing number of officers from other departments assigned to Australian missions overseas. While the former secretaries refer to formal mechanisms that DFAT traditionally employed and, indeed, refined, to manage the greater diversity of staff in overseas missions and coordinate the multiple lines of reporting, they do not really address the net result of more departments having an 'international branch' to which their own overseas staff reported. Yet the practice whereby other officials, when serving overseas, were formally seconded to DFAT, as is the case in many other countries, was still not widely enforced. Moreover, the presence of these representatives in Australia's overseas missions was not always problem-free. This change naturally complicated DFAT's policy role, made it more difficult for DFAT to keep track of the specialised and sometimes technical issues that arose. Overall, as a result, DFAT's voice in Australia's responses to some issues was diluted and generally its policy influence was eroded. So it is not altogether surprising that, during this period, the concept of the 'Australian foreign service' was neither advocated, nor was this terminology often used. Austrade (always under its own legislation) and some other departments would not necessarily recognise that they were part of an Australian foreign service. For example, the secretary of DFAT is not generally recognised, even informally, as the head of the Australian foreign service, whereas the secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet is often perceived and treated as the *de facto* head of the Australian Public Service.

While the DFAT institution is strong and the culture pervasive and enduring, many developments that occurred during this period contributed to a dilution of the departmental culture. Reinforcement of the departmental culture is achieved in part through training and early career instruction. But from the mid-1980s, DFAT stopped running its own training courses and outsourced these to Australian universities. Even though departmental staff still acted as

'lecturers', this meant a gradual dissipation of the departmental culture over time. Strangely, perhaps, there was never any joint training with Austrade or AusAID staff within the same portfolio, nor are there regular staff exchanges with either of those agencies (although staff transfers occasionally occur as one-off events). The 1992 Senate Committee report criticised the 'paternalistic management style' with its 'reliance on individual relationships'; the 'closed shop' limiting recruitment of 'outsiders' into the department; career prospects of officers already in the department; the lack of reinvigorating mobility between DFAT and other departments; and the 'insular' character of the department which discouraged talented people from joining. While it noted the significant improvements that had been made in most of these areas, it called on the department 'not to be complacent', to 'continue to make rigorous efforts to improve its administration' and to be 'continually alert to areas of potential regression or management failure' (Senate conclusions 13.9 1992).

All of the secretaries whose words appear in this publication made significant contributions to the department, but the nature of their contributions was obviously influenced by their individual qualities and experience, and by the circumstances in which they served. Some, such as Stuart Harris, had a greater impact as reformers than others, but this was not necessarily the result either of choice or natural leaning alone. Sometimes the secretaries were presented with a reform mandate, or found themselves in a situation where the department needed to keep pace with reform occurring in the public service around it. Some had a high public profile in their job, others less so.

The personal backgrounds of these secretaries were quite different, although their professional careers have some similarities. The two more 'traditional' diplomats, Peter Henderson and Richard Woolcott, both went to Geelong Grammar School, while Stuart Harris was born and attended high school in the UK. As bureaucrats, all experienced working closely with ministers and had been exposed to political processes. Significantly, four of the five had spent the formative years of their careers in Foreign Affairs, with a mixture of overseas and head office experience. But three (Harris, Flood and Costello) had experience of working in senior positions in other departments, while two (Henderson and Woolcott) had spent their entire working careers in DFAT. Richard Woolcott had spent more time overseas than his fellow secretaries. He had, however, spent some years as head of the Department's media office, giving him unusual breadth of knowledge about the workings of the department. For all the former secretaries, except Philip Flood, their bureaucratic careers ended with their term as secretary; Flood was subsequently appointed Australian High Commissioner to the UK.

By the year 2000, the department was demonstrably a more confident institution than the one of the 1980s. Talk of the department being 'in crisis' or suffering

‘poor morale’ had stopped as DFAT secretaries gave priority to ensuring departmental staff gave the governments of the day what they required. For example, DFAT had helped ensure that Australian interests remained secure in the later 1990s notwithstanding considerable turmoil in the Australian region (Fiji, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands) where Australia for the first time could not depend on ‘great and powerful allies’. The department had already produced Australia’s first foreign policy white paper for the Howard government and was about to prepare a second version. Perhaps more than anything else, this was a revival of both the department’s pre-eminent role in policy-making in international affairs and an affirmation of the role of the secretary in overseeing this process.

It is curious, however, that no history of the department has ever been written and that three of the former secretaries in this volume are among the relatively few senior DFAT officers who have ever written about the operations of the Department.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Milner and Trevor Wilson 1986 (eds), *Challenges and Options for the Department of Foreign Affairs*, Australian Institute of International Affairs Occasional Paper No 5, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Entitled *Management and Operation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, the report by the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration was published in December 1992. This was two years after a performance audit of the Department by the Australian National Audit Office.

<sup>3</sup> Formal unions representing public servants or journalists across the public service had always been active in DFAT and its predecessors as well, but by the end of the 1990s had become the main voice for staff.

<sup>4</sup> In all, 350 trade officers and 140 Promotion Australia officers joined 2,300 Foreign Affairs officers (many of whom were local staff in Australia's overseas missions). Cited by Richard Woolcott in his contribution to *Managing Australia's Diplomacy: Three Views from the top*, AIIA (Victorian Branch) Occasional Paper No 2, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> In Canada, this involved 4,200 Canada-based staff and 3,600 overseas-based staff. See paper by Gordon Osbaldeston, former Under Secretary of External Affairs in *Australian Diplomacy: Challenges and Options for the Department of Foreign Affairs*, A.C. Milner and Trevor Wilson (eds) AIIA, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Early heads of other departments include Sir Peter Heydon (Immigration), Sir David Hay (Territories), Sir Arthur Tange (Defence), Keith Shann (Public Service Board), Bill Pritchett (Defence) and Peter Wilenski (Labour, Education and Youth Affairs, Public Service Board, Transport and Communications). Later appointees include Chris Conybeare (Immigration), Sandy Hollway (Industry, Science and Technology, Employment, Education and Training), David Sadleir (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation), Joanna Hewitt (Agriculture), Bill Farmer (Immigration and Ethnic Affairs), Dennis Richardson (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation), and Ric Smith and Nick Warner (Defence).