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THE EXPERTISE DEFICIT

A hopeful, ambitious attempt to understand and bridge
the gap that emerged between public sector decision
making and the expertise needed to inform it.

MARCUS WIGAN + PIA ANDREWS

Foreward

I was a relative latecomer to the joys of great public service. The purpose, impact and challenge of the work. Striving with others to make a meaningful difference for individuals, communities and society. Playing a small part in tackling truly complex issues within an extraordinarily complex operating environment.

In my limited travels in this world, I have yet to experience a team or organisation in the public, private or for-purpose sectors that can achieve great results without great expertise and the means to apply it. The reverse is all too often true.

As a leader transitioning from the private sector to the public sector, one of the pleasant surprises was the high calibre of the public servants who would become my colleagues, teammates and friends. Committed, hard-working, and with deep expertise.

Perhaps nowhere is the corporate catchcry of “our people are our greatest asset” truer than in public service. But of course, like many organisations, we didn’t always have the breadth and depth of talent and expertise we needed, nor did we always fully leverage the expertise we had to hand.

Looking after ICT procurement, I would see agencies procuring consultants to tell them what they need to do. The consultant would be asked to prepare a second procurement brief so the agency could go back to the market to find another consultant to implement what the first consultant told them they should do. Their internal expertise had been so run down to the bone that entire parts of government no longer had the capabilities and expertise to define and fulfil their purpose.

In an era marked by complexity, rapid change and growing public scepticism, the integrity and effectiveness of public institutions are more crucial than ever. Yet, as this book identifies, a pervasive expertise deficit threatens to undermine the effectiveness and performance of our public institutions. The authors delve into a pressing concern: the

diminishing capacity of public institutions to recognise, value and effectively integrate genuine expertise into their decision-making processes.

The insights presented here are not merely academic; they are a call to action for public servants, policymakers and citizens alike. By examining the historical context of the expertise deficit, the book offers a sobering yet necessary reflection on how we arrived at this juncture. It challenges us to confront uncomfortable truths about the undervaluing of internal and external expertise, and how this contributes to a crisis of trust and effectiveness in public service.

However, this is not just a critique; it is also a roadmap for renewal. The authors present a vision of what a modern, expert-driven public sector can look like – a sector characterised by integrity, responsiveness and a commitment to evidence-based decision-making. The three-part structure of the book allows for a comprehensive exploration of the current landscape, a hopeful vision for the future and actionable steps to bridge the gap between where we are and where we need to be.

As we navigate the challenges of misinformation, distrust and systemic barriers, the importance of a confident and capable public service cannot be overstated. This book provides the tools and insights necessary to empower public servants to reclaim their roles as trusted stewards of society. It emphasises that reform is not a solitary endeavour; it requires collaboration, engagement and a shared commitment to elevating expertise at all levels.

I encourage readers to engage deeply with the ideas presented here. Let this book serve as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue and transformative action within the public sector. Together, we can address the expertise deficit and work towards a public service that not only meets the needs of society today but is also equipped to face the uncertainties of tomorrow.

Thank you to Marcus and Pia for your tireless efforts to help us be better.

Damon Rees PSM

February 2025

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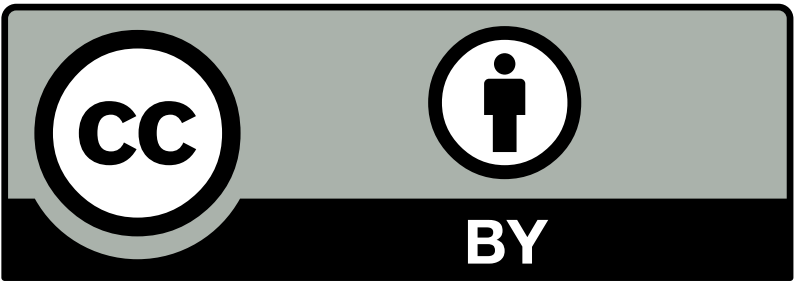
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Executive summary

This book explores a fundamental problem that undermines the integrity, competence and trust in public institutions: the expertise deficit.

Our observation is that public sectors have increasingly and systemically lost the ability to recognise, listen to, value or incorporate genuine expertise – both internally and externally – into policymaking and public administration, creating a dangerous gap between high stakes decision-making and the deep expertise needed to inform it. This has created challenges for core competencies and the capabilities required to effectively administer public institutions, as well as for public credibility and trust.

This problem can be fixed, but it requires a holistic and systemic approach. The Australian Public Service (APS) is undergoing significant reform to renew core capabilities and rebuild integrity, but if the cultural, systemic and structural barriers to expertise are not addressed, we may see history repeat itself.

This book aims to contribute meaningfully to public sector reform efforts underway in Australia and globally, particularly with regards to capability development and leveraging diverse forms of expertise in all forms, from all places. It has been written in three parts:

- Part 1 provides some **analysis of where we are today and how we got here**. It is a difficult read for those who work in and with the public sector, but it will help ensure we don't repeat the past in how we address the problem in the future. We document the growing inability in the sector over 40 years to recognise, value or leverage expertise, with challenging consequences
- Part 2 provides an **optimistic and inspiring vision** of what an expert and modern public sector could look like, one that sustains an evidence driven, high integrity and trustworthy approach

- Part 3 provides a **roadmap for how we can get there**. Too often expertise and capability development focus on part of the picture, with issues quickly re-emerging due to the systemic nature of the problem. We propose a systemic approach to address the expertise deficit

This book focuses primarily on the Australian public sector, and why internal expertise is such a critical foundation for public institutions to effectively deliver on their mandate and core responsibilities with verifiable integrity. It attempts to identify and address the undervaluing and outsourcing of expertise, which has arguably contributed to an existential crisis in the purpose and identity of public servants and the public sector in modern society. We propose that confident and engaged internal expertise is also a prerequisite for engaging with external and domain-specific expertise and experience found in our diverse communities and sectors.

We also explore the causal relationship between expertise and public trust, given the increasing reluctance globally to trust organisations of all kinds, but particularly those institutions that should uphold democratic, social and economic stability in a society. The trust issues are revealed in [OECD Trust in Government reports](#), the [Australian Election Survey](#), the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), and the inaugural Trust in [Australian Public Services report](#), just to name a few. Many of these reports note an increase in public trust of companies, presented in contrast with declining public trust in government. This is, of course, somewhat contextual because governments have a far higher bar for trust than companies due to the accountabilities and significant impacts of governments on people's lives. Nonetheless, there is a clear and growing challenge of public trust in the public sector, which is only exacerbated by the wave of misinformation overwhelming communities with the rise of artificial intelligence.

The trust deficit is at least partly the result of an expertise deficit, not just due to the broad reaching impacts of public institutions that increasingly can't effectively leverage expertise (internal or external), but also due to the inevitable reduction in informed expert engagement between the public service and the community. As artificial intelligence tools have become increasingly mainstream and widely adopted (for

good and nefarious purposes), opportunities and challenges for the community have emerged at a speed and scale never before seen, and the expertise to differentiate and navigate the situation is more critical than ever before.

The public sector has a special role in providing a social, regulatory and financial platform on which the community and individuals should be able to thrive: economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. Where one part of the public sector becomes considered untrustworthy by the community, trust in the whole system is put at risk. Reduced public confidence in the public sector leads to people distrusting, disengaging with, disrespecting and questioning the legitimacy of the services, policies, facts, laws and democratic outcomes administered by the public sector, which can create social fragmentation, instability and insecurity for the nation.

Many have blamed the problem of declining public trust on the easy scapegoats of social media, the emergence of a sensationalist fourth estate, populist politics and budgetary pressures. These challenges are real but have perhaps amplified the issues rather than created them, filling the power vacuums left by increasingly tentative and reactive public institutions. We are at the point where we must move beyond observing the issues and towards meaningful actions to address them.

A highly expert, confident, visible, responsive and accountable public sector can provide some certainty in an uncertain world while helping to provide trustworthy evidence, facts and data in a world of myths and misinformation. A highly expert public service is also capable of responding to changing needs and emergencies in collaboration with the communities served, providing a key ballast for society through what we know will be turbulent waters.

Addressing an expertise deficit won't be solved by simply hiring or training people. It requires a systemic and holistic approach, which we outline in Part 3. In short, we need to:

- **Step 1:** Create a purposeful and existentially confident public sector
- **Step 2:** Engage, value and elevate expertise at all levels
- **Step 3:** Put the “public” back into the public sector

We hope that public servants who read this book feel emboldened and encouraged to do their part, at all levels, to address the expertise deficit and contribute to public sector reform. Reform is nothing if not a team sport. Embracing, developing and engaging expertise is necessary to achieve a more adaptive, high integrity and highly effective public sector, one that people can respect and trust. This book has been written by authors who have played their own parts within several public services and are confident the current concerns can be successfully addressed.

PART 1

Where are we today?

Defining and understanding the expertise deficit and how we got here.

“But that’s just the trouble with me. I give myself very good advice, but I very seldom follow it.”

– ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Features of an expertise deficit

An ‘expertise deficit’ refers to the gap between decision-making and the necessary expertise required to ensure informed and responsible decisions are made. It is not to say public sector or other expertise doesn’t exist, but rather that there are barriers to expertise being leveraged across the board. This gap between expertise and decision-making leads to decisions and actions that are short term, fragmented, and reactive, creating behaviours that lose sight of sustainable delivery of purpose or policy outcomes.

The expertise deficit is both symptomatic and causal (now self-perpetuating), leading to dramatic program failures, workforce disempowerment, poor policy design and implementation, substandard procurement outcomes and an aversion to genuine public engagement. The issue is also symptomatic of a sector in crisis, a sector that can lose sight of its purpose due to two pressures that drive short term outputs and objectives: efficiency for efficiency’s sake and short-term political expediency. Myopic perspectives on the skills required to address issues and deliver outcomes combined with a diminishing public perspective of the value of public sector expertise has contributed to a culture of community frustration with and distrust of the public service.

The neutralisation of expertise in public institutions is not just the subjective experience of many experts. It is objectively and measurably evident in several key ways:

- **Public sector pay scales:** Many types of experts are effectively capped in their public sector careers and earning capabilities while they continue to follow their domain of expertise. People are advised, coached and explicitly trained to give up expertise, with the presumption that one cannot be both a great manager/leader *and* an expert. Generalist managers have far greater earning and career opportunities than experts, but less ability to engage with expertise inside or outside the public service in a critical and constructive manner

- **The performance framework:** The more senior the level, the less that performance is based on delivery, impact or outcomes, and the more fragmented pathways for leadership are, including structural isolation from the necessary diversity of expertise needed to deliver any meaningful policy outcome at scale. Senior executives tend to oversee a specific type of output (such as new legislation/regulation, delivering a service, managing a contract, creating a new department, or enabling functions like human resources, ICT etc) but without accountability for any measurable outcomes or impact. There are, for example, different senior executive expectations for roles that are defined as delivery, public policy, regulatory or specialists (Australian Public Service Commission SES work level standards, 2024). This begs the question: shouldn't all senior executives have a basic competency and expertise in several of these areas so they can collaboratively work to deliver outcomes holistically? Isn't great leadership an expertise too? Where is the general requirement for all senior executives to understand (or learn) public sector craft before being given an extraordinary amount of decision-making authority with public funds?
- **Executive v staff mobility:** Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) data shows that senior executives are often encouraged to move around the public service, which has led to a revolving door of leadership in many teams. This has created serious challenges for expert staff who, in turn, must establish rapport and trust with a senior executive to ensure they can confidently operate with delegated decision-making informed by the relevant domain expertise, to then have to start all over again a year or two later. As a result, many staff feel pressure to stay where they are because they themselves uphold and become the unintentional institutional memory of the function
- **Less experts in the room:** Experts used to brief secretaries and ministers. As generalist management took hold, we saw less experts in the room and more generalist communicators, who were expected to cover all aspects of their remit, even as they were increasingly trained to disengage from that expertise. The low

numbers of experts in the room means the ability to proactively and expertly test and explore desired options and outcomes with key decision makers has been diminished

- **Fewer experts in the organisation:** For several decades, specialists have increasingly been considered an externalisable commodity, not hired to improve things or contribute creatively to the policy or outcomes of an organisation but hired to do a specific task at the behest of managers. As such, much expertise became accessible at the speed of contract management, less readily available for day-to-day exploration, innovation or to proactively contribute to good public administration
- **Missing and misrepresented:** As the public sector became both more politically reactive, and less confident in its own purpose, role and expertise, public engagements and contributions became constrained, reducing the visibility of public sector expertise, and reducing the ability for public servant experts to engage with non-government experts in developing evidence driven policy development and delivery. Public sector experts used to engage publicly as part of the day job, but the lack of open and engaging public service expertise combined with the rise of centralised marketing and media has created issues for trust and credibility

The expertise deficit, or more accurately, the gap that has emerged between decision-making and the expertise needed to inform it, was created and has been exacerbated by an escalation of rolling interdependent changes to the public sector core, each of which we explore in the first part of this book:

1. A purpose vacuum compounded by “efficiency agendas”
2. Government as a business
3. Systemic undervaluing of expertise with generalist managerialism
4. Ghosting and gaslighting: systemic neutralisation of expertise
5. Functional segmentation creating a barrier to outcomes delivery

6. Increasing politically reactive planning and resource allocation
7. The enticing snake oil of contestability and “risk transference”
8. Reduced visibility and disengagement of public servants and expertise
9. Urgency-driven operating models lurching this way and that
10. Complete institutional amnesia and stagnation

As each of the changes above became normalised and systemic, they triggered and paved the way for the next, providing a hopefully useful history lesson for how we got the expertise deficit we see today.

1. A purpose vacuum compounded by ‘efficiency agendas’

The APS was not originally designed with any clear purpose. The first *Commonwealth Public Service Act* (1902) largely defined the rules of administration and positioned the heads of departments as being appointed by the commissioner (who was in turn appointed by the governor-general) and were responsible for delivering on the direction provided by the governor-general and in accordance with the functions of their respective departments. The objective of the 1922 *Public Service Act* was to ensure “*efficient, equitable and proper conduct, in accordance with sound management practices [...] of the public administration of the Australian Government*”: arguably more a focus on how to operate rather than why.

Although there were many revisions of the 1922 *Public Service Act*, major change wasn’t made until the *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth). This introduced a set of APS Values and a Code of Conduct for public servants, with the primary objective defined as establishing an “apolitical public service that is efficient and effective in serving the government, the Parliament and the Australian public”. This shift to serving more than just the governor-general, and more than just a minister, was profound but sadly was undermined over time through the expertise deficit that emerged through the same period. The 1999 Act went on to define its objectives as providing a legal

framework for effective and fair employment, to define the authorities and responsibilities of key executive roles (heads of departments, the commissioner, and the merit protection commissioner), and to establish the rights and obligations of public servants. Again, although more principles based and lofty in ideals, there wasn't a clear reason articulated for the APS to exist and for what purpose.

This lack of purpose and the challenges it creates was laid bare in the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration in the 1970s, as documented by Patrick Weller (2003), as he quoted Sir Lennox Hewitt when asked about the objectives of his department (Department of Minerals and Energy, at the time), who brusquely replied: *"I have not previously encountered the suggestion of objectives for a department of state. The royal commission will presumably not need anything more from the department than a copy of the administrative arrangements."* It begs the old rhetorical question, if you don't know where you're heading, how would you know you've arrived? But it took until the 2019 APS Review before the lack of a clear APS purpose was clearly identified as a fundamental problem (Thodey et al, 2019), and several more years before there was commitment to address the issue. Unfortunately, the Public Service Amendment Bill 2023 was not passed by the Parliament at the time, and so there remains a purpose vacuum, albeit tempered by the values and conduct gains made since 1999 and by the establishment of "stewardship" as a core principle in the 2023 APS Reform agenda.

To date, all versions of the Public Service Act have provided, at best, a guide for how to conduct oneself, without defining or protecting the ideal role or responsibilities of the public sector as a whole. The purpose of individual departments has often been drawn from the constitutional and/or legislative framing of each department, creating an inconsistency of operations and purpose across the sector. The long running lack of a clear and agreed shared purpose of the public sector in Australia has created a perpetual existential challenge for public servants. This purpose vacuum has readily and happily been filled by increasingly interventionist actors who either benefit from ineffective public institutions or benefit from highly reactive public servants.

There is an interesting parallel with Australian universities, who started with a strong purpose, a basis of trust and a culture that self-reinforced the principles of scholarship driven by the professors. Under systematic

underfunding by governments, a high level of reliance on profitable services (such as foreign students) grew rapidly, with structural and governance changes that removed cultural power from the professoriate and replaced it with a corporate culture. Predictably this systematically undermined the ethics and culture of the universities due to the rapid growth in reliance on external funding. Again, predictably, this has led to weakening of the purpose and ethics of universities in that pressure to drive profitability, resulting in practices such as increasing leniency to pass underperforming high-paying students, which is now amplified by the widespread use of purchased commercial essays and generative AI. The results are now emergent, with trust in the testamurs declining and trust in individual scholars when hired by the public service similarly fading away. The contrasts with the retired and emeritus professors are just beginning to be remarked on and the perceived and increasingly real commonality of university contracts with commercial consultancies has undermined the unique and independent expert role that academia has previously played in society and, critically, in public policy. Australia cannot afford to have the universities and CSIRO (which has been reasonably successful in avoiding this degrading of trust) tarred with the current lack of trustworthiness that has affected the public service.

In Australia, the purpose vacuum was ripe to be filled by an alternative ideology. The challenging global financial recession in the early 1980s fuelled austerity measures around the world, which was galvanised into a political movement that proposed small government and unrelenting privatisation as the conservative answer to perceived government overreach. This approach was heavily advocated by then US president Ronald Reagan and UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher in their global dealings, thus heavily influencing public sector policy, culture and operations in many UK and US partners, allies and aid beneficiaries, including Australia. “Good government” became overtly reframed as a matter of government efficiency and cost reduction, creating an overarching and dominant efficiency agenda, which was untempered in Australia by any overarching public sector purpose statement.

Every organisation should regularly focus on efficiency or it risks becoming bloated and unsustainable over time. An efficiency agenda can provide a practical and effective way to identify opportunities for

reducing waste, streamlining operations and delivery and ensuring an organisation doesn't grow beyond what is sustainable (for its specific context).

However, the flip side of an efficiency agenda is the perverse motivation to find savings for the sake of them. This leads to a zero-sum mentality, where everything becomes about just spending less money, regardless of the impact. There is an old joke about being 100% efficient: “*give me nothing and I'll do nothing*”, because an efficiency mindset easily devolves into a simple cost-cutting mindset, shortening the horizon of public sector planning and operations by naturally prioritising short term and process-oriented decision-making, and sacrificing value creation, outcomes-oriented and longer-term decision making. This leads to public institutions that systemically don't resource for or prioritise their purpose, mission, policy objectives or long horizon initiatives, just to save a few dollars. An overwhelming financial imperative, unbalanced by other pressures, also makes it hard in public sectors to justify creating space and time for innovating or addressing long-term challenges, even though, ironically, many in the private sector manage to fund innovation just fine.

So while efficiency agendas are needed, they need to be short, sharp and targeted exercises, run perhaps every couple of years as part of a broader program that is otherwise more focused on the long-term delivery of policy outcomes and public value. Otherwise, an organisation becomes operationally hollow, ineffective, low impact and lacking in purpose. Sound familiar? Sadly, this is the observable result and first major issue that results from long-term application of “efficiency dividends”, especially when “savings” that are supposed to be invested in system transformation are simply returned to the budget bottom line. As policy outcomes and value to the public become increasingly lost in a sea of financial imperatives, a perverse incentive emerges to disengage with experts, who can and do tell you the negative impacts of purely financial decision-making. As such, the establishment of a perpetual and dominant efficiency agenda ~30 years ago systematically changed and shaped the values and culture of a new generation of public sector senior executives, creating a wedge between experts and

decision makers. Decision-making became heavily skewed towards lowest cost, and real 'value for money' became harder to determine outside of the context of cheap, cost neutral or a return on investment.

The second major issue created from a dominant efficiency agenda in Australia was a new fiscal policy introduced where departments had to request approval for any major project or change, requiring new central oversight and political support through the mechanism of a New Policy Proposal. This created a competitive and politicised approach to system renewal and reform, rather than departments simply managing their systems within a set budget, which would enable more flexibility in innovating and continuous improvement. As Lesley Seebeck writes, "If a large capital asset, or a multiplicity of smaller systems, need replacing, then rather than relying on its own resources, an agency [now] has to seek funding as a new policy proposal through the budget process" (Seebeck, 2021). This created a perverse incentive to build mega proposals with the maximum amount possible not just to introduce new functional capabilities, but also to renew or offset the underspend in core systems. This has created something of an arms race between all departments (that need to seek permission for systems that are perpetually in need of renewal) and the Department of Finance, which has the unenviable position of trying to determine "value for money" for the enormous pipeline of requests for funding.

The issue was dramatically worsened when all New Policy Proposals were later required to be "cost neutral", creating a boom in creative accounting and a worsening of actual outcomes and behaviours. One of the predictable but devastating impacts is the increasing lack of confidence of senior executives to use their delegated authorities to make any change or improvements in their departments without political approval, leading to increasing operational stagnation and the presumption of having to 'pivot' all efforts towards the priorities of the government of the day. An interesting question that all public servants could ask in this scenario is "what proportion of our budget/resourcing should pivot to the government priorities of the day and what proportion must serve the legislative and constitutional purpose of the public institution?" In the absence of this discussion, the trend can emerge as a 100% pivot towards political objectives, undermining the purpose and mandate of public institutions.

The final blow for expertise from a perpetual efficiency agenda was a lack of preparedness for the inevitable clash of modern and continuously changing technologies with traditional and relatively static bridge-building budgeting models. Software systems don't (or shouldn't) cost nearly as much as building a bridge or a dam, and software is necessarily and continuously changing (upgrading, iterating and improving to respond to changing environment and user needs). But because a bridge-building mindset dominated government budgets for most of our history, we already had a skew towards CAPEX (capital expenditure) rather than OPEX (operational expenditure), which is not suitable for software or any other rapidly changing technology. CAPEX projects tend to have a set term, clear outcome/outputs/process, an end date, whereas OPEX investment is perpetual and enables responsiveness to change. Cutting OPEX funding became fashionable in an efficiency agenda, creating three issues:

1. decreased internal expertise as internal capabilities and expertise became increasingly outsourced
2. lower OPEX impacts your capability to operate core systems and creates administrative burden in the endless bidding for dressed-up project funding just to keep the lights on
3. because CAPEX has an end date, what should be continuous, normal and operational improvements to the core systems all became subject to central and political budgetary processes, creating a slow, static and large approach to system change, rather than being able to take advantage of small, cheap and adaptive practices and technologies

As Lesley Seebeck cautions, “the imposition of the ED (efficiency dividend) on OPEX and CAPEX make it hard to fund small, more manageable, less risky transitions and associated change management” (Seebeck, 2021).

Although efficiency agendas were initially adopted as a necessary response to the economic crises of the 80s and 90s, governments became somewhat addicted to efficiency as a new north star, eventually replacing all other success criteria and becoming a proxy purpose for some public institutions.

2. Government as a business

Throughout the economic pressures above, one of the presumed saviours of the public sector was the private sector. An ideology of privatisation was championed throughout the 80s and 90s, initially by UK and US political leaders and later by Australians, with the presumption that private sectors are inherently more efficient and profitable (Centre for Public Impact, 2016), and therefore something the public sector should mimic.

The shift to a “business” mindset in public sectors in the 1990s was normalised through the implementation of a framework called “New Public Management” or NPM (Juneja, 2023). This shift led to a range of unintended consequences, including an unhealthy and perversely incentivised obsession with “efficiency” for its own sake. It is inevitable in such an environment that policy outcomes and benefits to society become sacrificed on the altar of savings, with the very purpose of a public sector eroded over time through continuous and presumed contestability. The concept of the public sector as an enabler for living well, a strong economy, global competitiveness or indeed a mechanism for addressing social inequality and lifting people up appears to have only systemically survived in some nations (and in the hearts of most public servants), whereas many Western nations adopted a mindset that government can’t be a solution to a problem, but only a problem itself to be solved. It also became fashionable to privatise public infrastructure and services, ostensibly to run them better, which has led to innumerable failings of systems and services over time. Even today, there is not a clear and shared view on what should be run by the public service in Australia, with one prevailing school of thought starting with the premise that everything is contestable, creating no room for confident and long-term stewardship of public infrastructure or services.

A “business” mindset in government doesn’t have to be entirely negative — it can encourage efficiency, cross-sector partnerships and investment in improving the “customer experience” of people (including communities and businesses) that have to interact with departments and agencies. It simply has been taken too far in many ways, often applied blindly without the special context of government. When the

functions of government are all referred to as ‘business units’ there is an implicit expectation to act in a for-profit way, seeing savings or cost recovery as an end rather than a means, with an implicit zero-sum game competitiveness between functions (and departments) which should otherwise be working closely together to get holistic policy and public outcomes for the community. Citizens are not ‘customers’ and have no choice where to go if a service is inadequate or fails them. The business imperative combined with separation of policy from operations, of strategy from implementation, and of almost every expert discipline from each other, has contributed to operational segmentation, cross-functional budgetary cannibalism, and funding prioritised around perpetual short-term urgency rather than in what will deliver sustainable, measurable and meaningful outcomes.

The problem is not entirely one of public service. The widely endorsed “steering not rowing” mantra of the 90s and “[New Public Management](#)” had much to do with it (Andrews, P. 2019). There was a triple threat trend of:

1. dispensing with expensive highly skilled technical and other specialists
2. the outsourcing of large segments of activities, treating all aspects of public sector as “contestable”, combined with
3. an intentionally ‘generalist’ management style, where expertise was discouraged from senior ranks, and became associated with more junior or contracted labour

The structural shifts in accountability of the civil service have been complicated by the shifts to a business mindset, and not accepting private sector discount rates are far higher than the public sector and infrastructure decisions. This confusion has also shifted the types of people recruited and employed in public service towards a dominance of project managers from subject experts capable and empowered to advise based on sound capabilities, and to give independent advice to government instead of simply the execution of projects they are required to deliver.

Treating the public service like a business has now become the norm, with the structures, language, practices and incentives inherited from private sector managerialism. We know that public sectors have constitutional and legislative responsibilities that are different from businesses, and we know citizens don't expect public sectors to act in the same way -- which is evident in the feedback, discussions, user research and myriad public engagements -- yet when we adopt the mindset, language and success criteria of a business, we create incentives to act like a business, which undermines the unique and important role of the public sector in society.

Shifting the public sector from a now dominant "business" mindset and language is critical if we want to achieve a more humane, credible, trusted and impactful public service. The language of business is dangerous and a challenge because it makes it culturally and socially acceptable to obscure matters that are complex, uncomfortable, distressing or morally challenging. It is easier to talk about "business requirements" than to discuss programs that create social or individual harms, with ethical requirements often not a formal part of the process. It's easier to engage in by-the-book "contract management" than to acknowledge, advocate for and optimise for the duty of care to prison inmates or vulnerable communities affected by punitive policies. Robodebt (Morton, 2024) showed us that empathy has not been rewarded or valued in public servants for some time, to the point where senior leaders have seen it as a distraction or barrier to efficient delivery. This systemic emotional disengagement drives behaviours at all levels that are a significant barrier to values-driven, humane and empathetic policies, services and programs. By introducing a "business" ethos and operating imperative, New Public Management certainly normalised the valuing of efficiency over empathy, with structures, culture and operations expected to prioritise savings as an end, not a means. This has led to systemic undervaluing of empathy and values in planning, decision-making and prioritisation, creating a systemically, if unintentionally, inhumane operating model in modern public institutions.

Quite simply, public sectors should not be driven by a solely financial or efficiency imperative because it conflicts very quickly with policy, ethics and public good outcomes, and inevitably leads to decisions that

prioritise money over people. The horizons for public policy are often, and appropriately, much longer than commercial horizons. But when everyone is under constant financial and business pressure, there is precious little time, permission or support for proactive horizons to inform policy or program planning. This is more dangerous in a world that is constantly and increasingly changing, the scale of which is a relatively new issue. Indeed the accountabilities of the public service is both to the community (fair and forthright informed advice) and to government (in implementation of policies): there is little sign of the former in current public service structures and operations.

When you compound this with a systemic lack of differentiation between core and non-core functions in a department, you can see funding starts to be heavily prioritised around urgency rather than longevity. There is often a lack of alignment or balance between personal (senior executive), systemic (political and public sector) and citizen (public) priorities, with senior public servants prioritising top-down imperatives rather than investing in the core functions and foundations that deliver on the purpose of a public institutions, or that support the needs of the community. This purpose is often encoded in the constitutional or legislative basis of the organisation, or sometimes in policy. But if you don't prioritise funding (and structure and incentives) around purpose, then it becomes necessary for an organisation to find itself running side hustles to supplement critical systems, functions or staff, which is an inherently unsustainable pattern. Innovation is seen as a nice to have, rather than critical for evolving antiquated systems or processes, but in an age of constant change, enabling innovation is now everyone's job, and the increasing range of disciplines becoming influential across policies requires greater skill levels and wider perspectives than a business orientation would or could sustain.

Another consequence of a business imperative was that enabling capabilities like ICT became focused on "business needs" of program areas without necessarily building the policy imperatives or intended impacts into the system design, monitoring or operations. This led to a huge range of software/data systems that are built to meet various technical requirements but are not necessarily built to drive an intended policy impact, creating a systemic blindness to human or community

context or consequences. This can range from the apparently innocent shifts to automated decision-making that missed individual assessment – robodebt is a classic case – to exploitative gaming frequently observed in the outsourced employment “system” at such huge cost to the community. While royal commissions have identified appalling examples where the monitoring processes have failed to identify negative human consequences (aged care is a standout example), the engagement processes required to do a better job are no longer options but necessities, and the current management strategies are proving to be very costly in organisational memory.

So while there are certainly things that public sectors can learn from the private sector, we need to reconnect with the basic premise and purpose of public sectors. Success in the public sector should not be measured purely by the relatively simplistic and sometimes perversely incentivised criteria of a business. Success needs to be measured by purpose, policy efficacy, public outcomes, value created and community levels of trust and confidence in public institutions. These are, of course, the outputs of good public service work. Public institutions play a unique and critical role in society, ideally providing stability and mechanisms for an equitable, fair, safe and prosperous nation. They need to be capable of borrowing and learning from other sectors while also systemically maintaining an operationally robust and existentially confident sense of purpose and mission.

If accountability to the community is taken seriously, then the capacity to anticipate and look forward on solid grounds becomes a central issue. This sits uneasily with some of the management styles now becoming embedded, especially those that prioritise “business outcomes” over public outcomes.

3. Systemic undervaluing of expertise with generalist managerialism

With the establishment of a perpetual efficiency agenda, subsequent leaders were expected to maintain and even redouble efforts towards that north star, eventually creating a public sector environment where people who could find savings for savings sake were *more valued* than

those who knew how to deliver on the purpose or mandate of a public institution, creating a perverse devaluing of public sector expertise. This was normalised and operationalised through a new model of “generalist management” introduced to the public sector through New Public Management, creating a seismic shift in executive ideology and behaviours.

Ostensibly imported from the private sector, “generalist management” created an executive culture that was more focused on the mechanisms of management than it was on delivering public policy or value to the community, creating short-term expedience behaviours that always and inevitably devalues, disempowers and distrusts expertise within their organisation. Expertise became the pesky inconvenient truth that gets in the way of executive careers, and “generalism” became a legitimate and highly rewarded career pathway, with specialisation and expertise increasingly seen as a limiting trait of lower ranking (and lower paid) public servants. Its absence does not increase the respect for managers either inside or outside the service, and where political action is perceived as driving personal strategies, this accelerates losses in trust.

There is certainly a strong argument for valuing, hiring for and building leadership skills in senior executives, but generalist management training doesn’t produce leadership behaviours. It has produced by now several generations of micro-managers who don’t fundamentally understand or are motivated by purpose, policy or public outcomes. It has created observably corporate sociopathic behaviours where senior executives are taught to treat staff as numbers, to delegate unimportant tasks, to hold tight the control of decision making, and to outsource expensive specialist skills (which predictably became more expensive when organisations became reliant on contracting). Generalist managers are taught to measure success in general ways, creating a natural friction between executive success indicators and purpose-based success, with lower-level public servants left to do their best in driving the mandate of their institutions, often directly impeded by senior executives.

The false presumption that a person can only be either an expert or a manager, forced through a bifurcated career progression approach, also created an unintended friction and fracturing for how the public

sector values and leverages expertise internally. The more senior a person, the more generalist they are expected to behave, and the less domain knowledge they are expected to have, leading to increasing mutual incomprehension and inevitable distrust between experts and management, creating an unfortunate and dangerous air gap between decision making and the expertise needed to inform it.

This trend has been well documented by academics and think tanks and is captured well by Althaus and Wanna (2008) who identified this shift as, “the preferential elevation of the ‘generic’ mobile executive suggests an emphasis on administrative competence (‘neutral competence’) rather than policy or technical expertise”. Melo & Beck (2014) went further to explore and document how generalist management practices in the health sector created less effective and even negative impacts on public health, as “performance management” became increasingly focused on how individuals managed self and down, rather than how they contributed to health outcomes. The bifurcation of assumed capacities between technical and managerial further complicates the steady growth of cross boundary issues affecting and affected by policy (Eds. O’Flynn, J., Blackman, D, Halligan, J., 2013). This went so far as to have led highly qualified experts who rose through the ranks in public service to hide or talk down their expertise, to fit in more comfortably with the new generalist management culture, leading to expertise being lost and not replenished as those people retired over time.

An expedience mindset was thus normalised in managers, creating more perverse incentives to disengage with expertise and inconvenient facts, This, in turn, created the conditions in which senior leaders started to ask, and then demand, that more junior experts produce evidence to support a direction, rather than seeking evidence-driven policy or options. The tag of ‘policy-based evidence’ thereby takes on a dangerous life.

The criteria and contexts of recruitment were inevitably altered by these narrowing of perspectives. It is hard to recognise or value expertise in recruitment when expertise is perceived as both inconvenient and a more junior competency. Effects of and on recruitment are important, as they lead to structural rigidities in an organisation. Recruitment processes create an amplification of and

echo chamber of what is perceived as “good” in an organisation, so as “good” became synonymous with expediency and ruthless efficiency for efficiency’s sake, recruitment started to naturally give preference to generalism over expertise, at all levels. A lack of purpose or outcomes-based performance measurement in senior roles, means that senior leaders are now primarily valued for the time they’ve already had in an identical role, rather than for their relevant expertise or delivery record in other roles, creating a perverse incentive to keep hiring more of the same, even when the work or domain have changed and even when the current approach is demonstrably failing. Arguably this has created a perverse incentive for senior leaders to not try new things or expand their expertise or experience, because it counts against them in subsequent recruitment.

This systemic pressure to maintain the status quo created a “safe hands” recruitment mentality in senior roles, where it is presumed that someone who has done the same job for a long time is safer than someone new, particularly in senior management, even when the conditions of the role have fundamentally changed over time or require new strategies. With the increasing speed of technological, global and societal change in the modern world, compounded by an increasing rate of emergencies (natural, financial, health), it begs the question how will we create more adaptive, resilient and responsive public institutions if we just keep doing more of the same? Generalist management demonstrably slows down and makes less effective the decision making in an organisation, which inevitably stifles expertise and innovation, disempowering the workforce, and deprioritising efforts to deliver on purpose and public impact. So how are the hands that have been trained in generalist management considered more “safe”? As fresh disciplines and approaches are always popping up a technical base that allows reasonable assessments of new developments to be detected and deployed, even if it means a shift in the primary technical base of the civil servant.

Additionally, while the well-meaning goal of improving independence, fairness and breadth in recruitment created many improvements in processes, we also saw expertise increasingly removed from the recruitment processes or entirely overridden by non-expertise assessment criteria (like management, culture, etc). Experts will often

know the best of the best in their domain, but this often means they can't be involved in hiring the most expert, so conflicts of interest management can unintentionally neutralise expertise and the organisation's ability to recognise or prioritise the hiring of true expertise.

It is worth noting that the expertise and professionalism still often detected in public sector tradecraft is largely absent and unappreciated. In 1902, the Commonwealth Public Service Act required that all potential public servants first pass an examination, the subject of which was based on whether they were to be in a Professional, Clerical or General Division. The means of hiring people without the examination was introduced in 1918. However, approval from the Commissioner and Governor-General was required, so it was only able to be used for strong exceptions. In the 1922 *Public Service Act*, the general examination was removed and replaced with examination being at the discretion of Boards and executives. As expertise became less valued over time, public sector tradecraft also became undervalued, creating a challenging situation whereby external professionals came to apply their various skills and expertise without the necessary context and experience of a public sector, resulting in variable outcomes that aren't always aligned with the policy, constitutional, legislative or public expectations of the public service or indeed any specific public institution.

When specialists, expertise and outcomes-based performance of senior managers are seen once again to be critical elements of the public service mix, this will change the modes of operation within the current structural constraints and place pressure on those that have grown up in this system to adapt. As more experts and specialists join or return to the public service, both the capacity and the motivation to prioritise evidence-driven policy, to ensure effective delivery and to anticipate new needs and opportunities will grow, but it all starts with the systemic revaluing of expertise at all levels.

4. Ghosting and gaslighting: systemic neutralisation of expertise

The 90s mythology of “let the managers manage” combined with systemic undervaluing of expertise created an unfortunate and devastating inability and unwillingness of senior decision makers to trust and empower experts and expertise, both internally and externally. Managers were increasingly encouraged to adopt a superiority complex based on seniority, while encouraged to disengage with expertise. It became increasingly assumed that senior leaders are “better than” their more junior counterparts, and that political offices are “better than” even the most senior public servants. With less interactions and candour between levels, more decision making dragged away from experts, upwards in the org chart and even outside of public institutions into the political sphere, with the presumption that “business needs” should trump evidence or contradictory facts, even when the “business” needs starts to become more about budgetary constraints, short-term ministerial objectives, short term urgencies, press releases or other short term pressures that aren’t align to purpose or supported by evidence– and ever further isolated from the rapid changes in expertise that are now common throughout society.

Consider for a moment how it must feel to be a senior executive, convinced of your deservedness for elevation, but fundamentally not understanding the function you have been parachuted in to manage. The terrifying reality of this scenario is worthy of some empathy and compassion, for the leader and for the people who work with and for them. As we’ve seen more focus on higher emotional intelligence in management, this scenario has seen some senior executives get better at engaging with staff but still be convinced that as the “senior” person, they must make all the important decisions, thus maintaining the profound and dangerous gap between decision-making and the expertise needed to inform it. Basically, if staff can convince their senior executive of the evidence then they might achieve an evidence-driven decision, otherwise the decision-making is driven by top down or external pressures. This in turn has created a perverse incentive of systemically valuing communications skills over and often in preference to relevant expertise.

All of the above has led to expertise (from public servants and externals alike) being simultaneously **ignored** (because expertise is the presumed to be the domain of less senior people) and **gaslit** (where expert staff are told their evidence and advice is not hitting the mark because they don't understand the context/strategy or need to communicate better, with their lived experience ignored or outright denied).

The current dominant assumption that those with specialist or cross disciplinary skills are there solely to do **delivery or tasks** rather than to **think and anticipate**, will continue to disempower and neutralise real expertise in public institutions, and continue to widen the gap between policy design and delivery, with policy analysis uninformed by expertise or experience. A mindset that expertise can simply be procured as needed leads to, at best, some short-term gains that inevitably and demonstrably sacrifice the organisational capability and confidence needed to drive strategic outcomes, policy efficacy and operational effectiveness in the long term.

The most important area where the entire community is short of specialist IT skills, and where internal undermining of expertise is particularly devastating, is security. This area is growing both as a national and an individual threat at an alarming pace, far outpacing the capacity or internal judgment capacities of senior APS staff, and the whole business and government communities are desperately short of such staff and so the security problems are becoming of extremely large scale. Significant data breaches experienced by Medibank (2022), Optus (2022), Latitude Financial (2022) have made the entire community painfully aware of this vulnerability. Yet policy and implementation design from the APS is lagging far behind. The disconnect between this issue and identity verification and service delivery has not yet been absorbed and acted upon. This lag is both significant and critical.

The technology industry has begun to address the shifts needed in professional ethics, and the concomitant need to endorse and support whistleblowers (example, Wigan, 2022), has not been sufficiently addressed as a broad-based policy area within the APS.

The current AI panic has hit hardest in areas where the technical underpinnings in knowledge are weakest. There is still too little understanding that however convincing the scripts are that ChatGPT

or Copilot (or the rest) may deliver to prompts, they are often simply providing a synthesis of existing (and sometimes inaccurate) texts available on the web. In these early days of generative AI solutions being easily available for mainstream usage, they are often being used as a proxy for expertise or knowledge, a dangerous step taken by generalists who don't have the requisite expertise to understand or assess the veracity, context or accuracy of what is produced. This confusion is greatest amongst time and deadline pressured generalists who feel forced to look for external sources for advice or expertise, many of whom they may not have the time, expertise or access to meaningfully engage. As these technologies evolve, they provide some powerful opportunities to augment, amplify and assist expertise, but generative AI outputs should not be simply taken as historical or accurate, nor as an intelligent judgment or summary of current knowledge or experience. The role of AI in the workforce will evolve over time, but public institutions must maintain clear lines of accountability and evidence for decision making and activities, so there needs to be a clear and consistent approach to how AI is used to ensure public sector integrity is not compromised, and to ensure public sector expertise outsourcing is not simply pivoted from vendors to AI tools.

The traditional responsibility of major organisations to foster and provide training for their staff has long been abandoned in favour of loading all these costs onto the students themselves. This has both had the effect of building up substantial debts for the students themselves and reducing the costs that should be carried by the organisations themselves. The effects of this large reduction in internal training and expertise have been significant, with responses to the public in specialist areas of responsibility often not responded to.

This systemic undermining and neutralisation of expertise in all forms has had additional impacts on creating a misguided approach to change and reform efforts, where it is often assumed change must and should be led from the top, even as the expertise needed to inform evidence-driven and purposeful change has increasingly been pushed to the bottom. Public servants now have a reputation of being change resistant and lacking in innovation, but the lived experience of many public servants is that "change" programs are often uninformed, designed and driven from the top with potentially devastating impacts on citizens and

the community. So many of the more junior public servants spend an increasing amount of their time and effort mitigating negative changes on behalf of their clients and communities, driven by their purpose and sense of responsibility to the public. We saw this most clearly on display in the 2022–23 robodebt royal commission, where senior leaders largely talked about how they simply did what they were told so they weren't in the wrong, but frontline and more junior public servants talked about how they tried and were punished for pushing back on illogical, illegal and devastating changes that were affecting their clients and staff every day. The position of senior leadership taking a defensive stance that they were simply following orders has not been an acceptable position since Nuremberg.

Never has it been so clear that the heart and soul of public service is hanging by a thread in the most disempowered parts of public service, while the senior executive service has largely become an instrument of ruthless and unaccountable expediency.

In the meantime, the systemic ghosting and gaslighting of expertise within the public service has predictably eventually extended to ghosting and gaslighting expertise outside of the public service. When senior executives perceive and are incentivised to treat success as simply getting a decision or keeping one's head down rather than delivering measurable policy and public impacts, then facts and evidence of all kinds become both an inconvenience and a threat, both to the individual career and to the organisation. Equally, when public engagement in all forms is treated like a job for professional media and communications teams or generalists rather than the experts who need to engage with external expertise, then we lose authentic engagement, creating a structurally reinforced form of neutralising expertise, both internally and externally with significant credibility losses. Media/ comms and generalist teams are systemically motivated to get a “good news story” or get an output over the line, rather than what should be the overarching incentives and motivations to seek expertise to inform, modify or change direction to achieve a measurable and meaningful policy and public outcome.

5. Functional segmentation

There have always been challenges of siloed behaviour in Westminster-based public sectors however, New Public Management reforms compounded this issue by introducing functional segmentation of specialisations. Policy, drafting, implementation, investigations, litigation, data, technology, services etc have all become separate “business units” that compete for funding and attention. Each has different KPIs that largely don’t align with the overarching purpose or mission of the department, which acts to redirect efforts and processes from the overarching purpose and results in cannibalistic, functional competition that detracts greatly from the ability to be outcomes-focused or collaborative across teams, even within the same department. Diverse functions have only generally been able to come together to work collaboratively during emergencies, thus creating extraordinary exceptions that prove the rule, and yet after each emergency, there is always a rush to return to the clearly less effective “business as usual” structures and operating model.

In pre-NPM times, people who worked as social workers and had developed serious domain expertise were directly involved in developing new social policies, legislation and program design. Functional segmentation forced the separation of disciplines, which created opportunities to professionalise domains resulting in some improvements in consistency and career pathways but also created an operating model where the diverse range of functions required to deliver outcomes are generally unable to work collaboratively due to different chains of command, functional cost centres and conflicting incentives.

As a result we now have, for instance, generic policy professionals who have become separated from expertise, experience, operations and even from impact and evaluation of the policies they are responsible for. We have established a professionalised and unacceptable form of hot potato passing, where the last public servant standing knows they will get burnt and so are motivated to push as much accountability as possible to other teams or departments. Bridging the policy/implementation divide is critical to ensuring high impact and outcomes-based efforts, with proper prioritisation and resourcing. Every public servant has

experienced the damaging implications of this divide but is generally told to stay in their functional box. So perhaps we need to consider organisational structures that have multi-disciplinary teams that are funded to deliver outcomes, rather than funded to deliver outputs. Meanwhile, just starting to perceive different functions as always necessary to the success of an outcome, as allies not distractions or blockers, is a good start.

The issue of functional segmentation creating a molasses-like slowdown of the ability to rapidly design and deliver anything, as everyone involved is structurally, culturally and even financially (through separate cost centres) separated from each other, and incentivised to always minimise the scope they are responsible for, creating gaps between functions and challenges for end-to-end delivery.

Looking a little further under the hood of these shifts is the engagement at a real working level under different cultures offers one way of bringing the proven gains from multiple disciplines and perspectives into closer understanding and often enhanced and novel outcomes into play. It is no accident that the terms ‘multidisciplinarity’ and now–slowly ‘transdisciplinarity’ are becoming more widely used, if not yet fully understood and implemented (Wigan, 2022).

There are two aspects of necessary change that underpin such initial shifts to more effective policy development.

1. The first is to enable a faster take up of the avalanche of new problems and indeed knowledge and techniques that are now appearing. If the speed of take-up of well-structured and published sound policy proposals and the technical finding that underpin them is accelerated then productivity in policy development will be enhanced.
2. The second aspect in this context is that the community needs, with the widespread likely impacts of many currently needed policies, these must be developed to ensure social licence is maintained at least a workable level.

Where do judgments of the material content sit in such a sequence? If project management is regarded as the key skill then the content becomes subservient to the process. Process matters a great deal, as does probity, but the capacity of those in charge of such processes requires them to have access to (and actually use) experts and expertise in the content at several stages. If process is deemed to be preeminent, then the investment in the networks and the resources where expertise resides become weaker and less regarded. There are elements of both apparent today in the evident lack of content knowledge in many areas of public service.

One must be careful not to assume that this applies at all levels: while the higher levels of public service have visibly become generalised and politicised, this is not necessarily the case at lower levels where high levels of expertise still reside – but are neither visible, nor networked with the community, nor utilised by decision makers, as the need for that type of input is rarely perceived by those with generalist process skills and judgment frameworks.

There are several areas of specialist expertise relevant to both formation and the implementation of policy. There are basic differences between knowledge, certification, execution and selecting which choices must be made to undertake tasks.

There is little tradition of valuing multidisciplinary expertise or approaches within any single discipline. The initial task of recognising this is often made harder by the limited range of those doing the judging. It is impractical to have a high number of multidisciplinary people in the service – but very practical to have a significant number who can work in a multidisciplinary way, in the service or outside it. There are a range of basic errors made in ‘collaborations’ or ‘focus groups’ that are frequently rooted in the balance between responses to questions or assumed outcomes, and attention paid to the unexpected responses or queries. Sharpening awareness of the value of unexpected or contradictory responses is a natural outcome of cross disciplinary awareness, and their significance highlighted by the experience of finding that in many carefully constructed surveys that, even so, the most valuable information is so often embedded in the comments, usually as a survey respondent afterthought.

This and other pragmatic lessons are rarely found in participatory processes and highlighting them can provide considerably deepened experiences. This will be of special value when open-ended questions instead of closed choices are used, but nothing will add value to such efforts to engage wider experiences and approaches unless open-minded frameworks for learning are used.

Leadership became equally functionally segmented, with senior executives accountable for the operations of their function, but no one clearly accountable for purpose or outcomes. With the efficiency and expediency mindsets identified earlier, success became codified as more efficiently doing what you currently do or are directed to do, rather than more effectively doing what will improve the impact or deliver a meaningful outcome. Functional segmentation has significantly disempowered most public servants from contributing to the purpose of their public institutions, except in the narrow band of functional responsibility of their “business unit”. In short, the diffusion of clear responsibilities for complex issues and outcomes created a situation where many people were responsible for segments, while fewer and fewer had clear responsibility for the whole of any issue bridging more than one or two of the current segments. Government is a complex operation, and the reduced awareness and environmental sensing caused by functional segmentation directly reduces the capacities to anticipate and to respond.

Unless responsibilities for delivering impact and outcomes, and for strategically anticipating and responding to the new opportunities and issues as they arise, then these functional gaps will prove harder and harder to bridge. The systemic inability of any function to perceive and address the opportunities and limitations of the patterns/discipline/perceptions being applied in their domain means that functions become isolated echo chambers of their own strengths, without the pressure to address or compensate for their weaknesses. In contrast, true multidisciplinary and multi-experiential teams can help to mitigate and challenge the natural filters people apply in their life and work, which can help to ensure the resulting work isn't always too derivative to be effective.

The final tragedy of functional segmentation has been the systemic blindness introduced, where almost everyone believes they don't have the authority to look beyond their function responsibilities, and are often punished if they make any attempt. "Stay in your wheelhouse" and "don't go above your paygrade" have become common sayings that act to neutralise expertise and any individual or team efforts to improve outcomes. It is no wonder public servants became isolated and disengaged, from each other and the public, creating what many refer to as the "Canberra bubble". If you forget for a moment the fact that Canberra generally and somewhat unfairly bears the national ire for the actions of federal politicians, who are 98% not from Canberra (only 2 senators and 3 representatives of a total 227 politicians are Canberra-based), it is still a reasonable thing for the public to be frustrated by public servants who are not engaging with the broader community or other sectors, regardless of the fact it is not always disengagement by choice.

Even attempts to establish highly effective central government policies and strategy has been undermined by increasingly generalist approaches to policy and strategic development, badly complemented by the presumption that principles-based approaches produce superior outcomes, in the face of evidence and experience to the contrary. Principles create the opportunity to interpret and implement a direction in the best interest of the regulated or legislated entity, and prescriptive rules create the opportunity for clarity and consistency of implementation. Both approaches have pros and cons, but since the ideological 90s push to deregulate for the sake of deregulation, principles-based policy has become a mindset drilled into the hearts and minds of policy professionals across the board.

6. Increasing politically reactive planning and resource allocation

Core purpose for most public institutions is most authoritatively found in their legislative and constitutional framing and responsibilities, which should drive the planning, policy, programs, prioritisation and definition of "success" for those institutions. However, as expertise and domain knowledge became less valued over time, less prevalent in senior

positions, and less empowered (culturally, functionally and structurally), public institutions began to lose their grounding in expertise or purpose, creating a dangerous vacuum.

There has always been a tension between politics and public servants. On one hand, this can be uncomfortable, but it can (and should) be a healthy tension that ensures a two-way pressure. Public servants are under pressure to respond to the democratically elected government of the day while also serving their legal mandate and the public, while politicians are under pressure to not overstep either the law or the public appetite for change. The public sector is both an enabler for policy reform and a check and balance on power, playing the important role of long-term steward for national and public good. Predictably, as the vacuum of purpose and expertise grew in public institutions, the space became occupied by politicians, who throughout history have often believed the public sector exists only to serve their agenda, regardless of the long-term consequences or evidence to the contrary.

Political interference in the Australian federal public service began well before NPM. In the original establishment of the APS, the head of the public service (the commissioner) was appointed by the governor-general and the heads of departments were appointed by the commissioner (CPSA, 1902). The department heads were “responsible for its general working, and for all the business thereof, and shall advise the minister of such department in all matters relating thereto”. This presents a clear line of responsibility where authority is assumed to come from pertinent legislation, and department heads advised ministers on the work, but didn’t wait for work to be commissioned by the minister, as we have seen emerge in the last few decades. This appointment process created an arguably healthy arms-length separation between public servants and politicians, however, in the 1922 *Public Service Act*, the Governor-General was required to only appoint a person as a department head (secretary) in accordance with advice and recommendation from the prime minister, arguably re-politicising the process. This was completely politicised in the 1999 *Public Service Act*, wherein the prime minister could appoint all secretaries unilaterally, but this was rolled back again to the 1922 standard, where the role is appointed by the governor-general at the recommendation of the prime minister.

The Whitlam government went further, openly questioning the value of independence and political neutrality and then placing several senior political staffers into leading departments (Prasser, 2023). With the emergence of a substantial expertise deficit, political interference rapidly grew, with subsequent governments increasingly determining the appointments of senior officials and eventually starting to openly direct departments on policy and operational matters. This represented a dramatic shift in the relationship between politics and public sectors: rather than defining policy outcomes, politicians increasingly chose to manage and direct the actions and operations of public servants, including through political appointments of senior officials. As Althaus and Wanna (2008) identified, “Today’s secretaries became unsure how far they could sponsor new agendas or policy initiatives ahead of the government’s immediate agenda — believing they were consigned to administering expediency” (Wanna interviews, 2005).

This issue coalesced in statements by former prime minister Scott Morrison who clearly stated his expectation that ministers set policy and public servants simply implement, with their ‘frank and fearless’ advice “only as good as the consideration in detail that it gives to implementation and execution” (Morrison, 2019). Morrison tried to direct the public service to be “an enabler of government policy not an obstacle” and this speech created ripples throughout the sector, as it effectively swept away the last tattered shreds of political neutrality, delivering on purpose and of trying to equally serve the government, the Parliament and the people. It became not just difficult, but individually undesirable for senior public servants to be proactive, decisive or innovative in responsibly delivering their mandate. Rather they became openly rewarded through short term decision making that satisfies the usually short term and ideologically driven electoral goals of ministers.

Many senior public servants blame political staffers as “wielding executive power in their own right, and without reference to the minister” however, “ministerial staff have no power to direct in their own right as opposed to their legitimate role in conveying the directions of the minister” (APSC, 2024). The public sector itself must bear some of the blame for this imbalance going so far. When political staffers or indeed ministers say jump, it doesn’t mean public servants have to

respond, “how high?” It is one of the hardest parts of the job, but public servants must maintain a high standard of independence, political neutrality and genuine stewardship for maintaining the integrity and mandate of the public institution in the long term. As such, public service senior executives are arguably just as much to blame for the current power imbalance of ministerial advisers and officers, because they yielded their delegated authority in the face of political pressure.

Some scholars and public servants argue that serving the minister is the only true mandate for public institutions, though this argument conveniently ignores both the constitutional and legislative responsibilities that many departments are meant to uphold (including to serve the government, the Parliament and the people, directly from the Public Service Act), and the historic and documented impact of politicisation creating less trustworthy and ultimately less effective public administration over time. The Robodebt royal commission was an important contemporary example of a public service so committed to unquestioningly delivering a policy of the government of the day (in this case, probably not entirely coincidentally, Scott Morrison) that it created an illogical, illegal and immoral program that brutally targeted the most vulnerable in our society, extracting much agony from the public servants forced to implement it at the coal face.

“Robodebt was a crude and cruel mechanism, neither fair nor legal, and it made many people feel like criminals. In essence, people were traumatised on the off chance they might owe money. It was a costly failure of public administration, in both human and economic terms.”

– ROBODEBT ROYAL COMMISSIONER CATHERINE HOLMES

How such a program came to be in the first place speaks to the dangers of politicisation, but also to the dangers of public servants failing to recognise and fulfil their legislated and constitutional duties, and failing

to maintain true stewardship and balance through striving to more equally serve the government, the Parliament and the people. It speaks to the danger of perceiving “frank and fearless advice” as the pinnacle of good public service, because it becomes too easy to abscond one’s duty to the public (or the law) with the excuse “but that is what the minister wants and I provided the best advice I could”. Robodebt is the perfect example of “policy-based evidence” where senior public servants twisted and turned to implement the will of the minister, regardless of the legal, moral or logistical implications, and regardless of all the countering evidence that emerged almost immediately, both externally and from more junior and front-line public servants internally.

Many public servants have been trained by now to believe that the only form of policy is that which is handed down from a minister’s office, which loses both the culture of stewardship and loses the checks and balances of existing legislative and constitutional frameworks, which in turn become interpreted as simply needing to be worked around. It is scary how many people interpreted robodebt as simply a failure to secure the legislative change required to make the actions legal. Will the next robodebt be perfectly legal but even more harmful to the community?

“Frank and fearless advice” as a north star for many has arguably led to a dangerous and demonstrated kind of learned helplessness that is used to excuse bad policies and programs by assuming only the minister has policy authority, and that public servants can merely advise, which can be ignored. Indeed, when you read all the guidance about how to make good policy in Australia, it usually defines policy as only the “Big P” type: that is, policy objectives set by the minister and government of the day. The current *Delivering Great Policy* guide for the APS opens with a definition of government policy, and the entire model assumes the only kind of policy being developed is policy advice to a minister (APS Academy, 2024). Where is the reference to upholding constitutional and legislative policies, or to the delegated authority to make operational decisions and policies within departments? Where is the clarity on what to say “no” to, and what should a healthy relationship between departments and governments look like?

Politicians will often choose to hire their own expertise, whether they are in government or not, and this practice of bringing expertise into informing political offices, particularly ministerial offices, can improve the quality of party policies and proposals to the Parliament, but also can create challenges when departments lose both their internal expertise (or the means to leverage it) and lose the confidence to advise when evidence or experience is contradictory to the minister's will (ANZSOG, 2024).

Even departmental operations and budgeting processes have become politicised, with regular reviews to assess how departments are prioritising government objectives in day-to-day investment and resourcing decision making. The simple question of “what resources should deliver on the core mandate and purpose of the department vs what resources should pivot to the government priorities of the day?” is not often considered, leading to an escalation of funding issues, where many core systems and legislated accountabilities of departments are deprioritised to make way for the ministerial agenda of the day. This technical and operational debt has accumulated over many years, with critical systems perpetually requesting funding through new policy proposals to simply keep operating.

Unless departments properly and sustainably invest in the delivery of their own core systems and the capabilities needed to deliver their mandated accountabilities, then they lose the ability to deliver anything at all in the long term. This systemic interference in operations and even the investment decisions of departments led, naturally, to industrialised pork barrelling, with subsequent governments using their power over departmental operations to drive electoral advantages through politically motivated investments, from grants to services to expensive rebranding exercises, even moving departmental offices to target electorates – a classic technique to shed both staff and unvalued expertise. This is particularly challenging for small agencies, whose incentives can cause them to prioritise the delivery of wide and ambitious policy agendas over investment in sustainable organisational infrastructure that would keep them functioning properly.

Politicisation has always been a challenge for public sectors, globally and in Australia. Prasser (2023) provides useful historical context

on politicisation in different nations, which have been through their journeys from the systemic incompetence of politicised nepotism to the effectiveness of qualified and politically neutral experts. From the 19th century civil service reforms in the UK, to the much earlier models in the Indian Civil Service and Chinese Imperial bureaucracy, there is a lot to learn from the past (Prasser, 2023). The Australian colonies (States) were considered particularly nepotistic, corrupt and ineffective in the early days, only adopting Westminster style improvements after a series of royal commissions which led to the first Commonwealth Public Service Act in 1902 being designed to try to ensure a merit-based, expert, efficient and above reproach federal public service (Prasser, 2023).

A genuinely politically neutral, expert and merit-based public service is clearly and historically not only a mechanism to temper the otherwise unbridled natural ambition of politicians, but when effective, is the biggest lever we have to shape and maintain our quality of life as a nation, even through great upheavals and continuous change. The public sector can and must play a continuing stewardship role, safeguarding our critical infrastructure, providing accessible and easy to use public services, and supporting national stability, economic prosperity and social cohesion. All of this requires genuine public trust and confidence, which requires public institutions to be clearly delineated from politics, engaged in their own public engagement and narrative, and always, always carefully and responsibly walking the fine line to equally serve the government, the Parliament and the public, as per the Public Service Act.

7. The enticing snake oil of contestability and ‘risk transference’

These pressures resulted in a kind of existential crisis in many Western public sectors, where public institution executives (and decision makers) became increasingly convinced of the inadequacy of their organisations, increasingly listening to consultancies that directly profited by providing “advice” that reinforced a narrative of the inadequacies of public servants. This particularly insidious form of professional “negging” has resulted in many senior executives simply not trusting the most

important and core work of the public sector to public servants, with policy, strategy, infrastructure, grants management and other core public sector responsibilities increasingly outsourced. Even when this has created short term efficiencies, the corporate incentives and profit motivation of for-profits will always, inevitably, lead to a conflict of interest with policy objectives and public good. The introduction and prevalence now of self-serving doublespeak like “risk/accountability transfer”, “high value industry experience”, “above the line consulting” and “expert strategic consulting”, all implies and reinforces a mental model where anything worth doing well, is worth outsourcing. This created an environment where the genuine value that can be found in engaging across sectors and with private sector vendors became unachievable, due to the increasing lack of trusted internal expertise involved in design, delivery, decision making or even the contract management needed to engage expertly. As this continued, the lack of expert capacity to review and validate what the consultants provide became lost.

Unfortunately, in an environment increasingly less capable of distinguishing expertise from charlatans, procurement and decision-making became something of a gamble. It is both tempting and comfortable for generalists to adopt the practice of choosing consultants that have predictable responses to directions given, with the careful avoidance of internal or community expertise. This habit solidified and accelerated the expertise deficit, exacerbated by new consultancy models that perfected an entire language and practice around inserting themselves into the very operating model of government. Perfectly camouflaged parasites that have weakened their hosts over decades.

Public servants, particularly in the central policy agencies, also became addicted to “contestability” as an ideology, untempered by any concept of minimum viable government. Contestability is [defined by the Department of Finance](#) as “*the prospect of competition in public sector functions to improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of contributing to achieving government’s outcomes.*” In practice, this means considering and actively encouraging competing ideas and delivery models in the pursuit of good public administration. The idea sounds reasonable and when applied carefully can be helpful. However, the widespread application of

contestability to all aspects of public service has now created a constant and increasing pressure on departments to justify their existence, purpose, capabilities, budgets and operations, and has been used to increasingly divest more responsibilities to the private sector. If you believe everything you do is contestable, how can you take a long-term view, or be a true steward for the sustainability of your function? If you don't have a minimum viable and baseline assumption about your core roles and responsibilities including what might not, in fact, be contestable, then short term divestment decisions become easier and more convenient than arguing for long term or sustained approaches to public administration.

For instance, outsourcing and the loss of internal expertise had a substantial impact on services provided to the public by the public sector. The initial externalisation of the implementation, review and assessment processes for services left the public sector in a very difficult position to execute all these roles on a contracted-out basis. Where review by technically skilled people is needed, even that inevitably had to be contracted out as the ability even to review advice with suitable expertise was eroded. Basic security, privacy and legal assurance started to be contracted out, creating enormous blind spots for organisations in trying to deliver on their remit in a compliant, responsible or proactive way. The combination of a pure efficiency mindset, run by generalist managers who don't understand or trust internal experience/expertise, with the structural barriers created by functional segmentation and an increasingly top-down pressure to just do what you're told (by the minister, the secretary etc) all created an unattainable success criterion for delivering quality services, outcomes and value to the public. The difficulty to operate well under all these pressures only fed further into the convenient narrative that public sectors shouldn't deliver services, thus providing an excuse to further outsource.

This isn't to say that nothing should be externally commissioned, but rather to say there is a balance to be found, and the current situation is far from balanced. It is regularly tilted towards the presumption that outsourcing is a generally preferred model, despite evidence to the contrary and in contradiction to the legislated and constitutional responsibilities of public institutions that should inform their core capabilities.

This contestability was amplified by significant changes in the accountabilities and authority of department heads throughout the 80s and 90s. Paul Barratt reflects on his experience of this issue, saying:

“...from 1984 to 1999 we moved from a situation where there was a single, tenured point of accountability, with the requisite standing and powers, for everything that happened under the minister’s purview, to a situation in which policy formulation, implementation, service delivery and even organisational design and organisational effectiveness are a highly contested space. The contemporary APS departmental secretary is a person with ambiguously defined ‘roles’ and ‘responsibilities’ under the Public Service Act, who, notwithstanding being defined as the ‘accountable authority’ under the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013, is obliged to compete with a shifting population of advisers and consultancy marketers peddling their wares.” (Barratt, 2021).

There has now been over 30 years of systematic externalisation of core functions of the public service. At the beginning this was straightforward, as the availability of specialised people in many given areas was regarded as readily on tap and, even better, in competition with each other to supply their specialities when seen to be needed. The gains were seen to reside in stripping out unnecessary and “readily available” external skills on a task-by-task basis. “Delivery” became largely seen as an area ripe for outsourcing and able to be simply managed through contracts and business processes, isolating policy knowledge within policy teams. It is one thing to be a specialist, but quite another to have the experience of the application of that specialisation, especially in the special context of government. As more specialisations were pushed out of government into contracting, and as the artificially created gap between policy design and delivery widened, that contextual memory and expertise for effective “policy delivery” became lost, replaced with “business requirements delivery”. We now have a perpetual game of blindfolded baton passing between teams with no one accountable or empowered to ensure the actual policy intent is being realised, with every part of the policy supply chain cut off from each other, and only accountable for their own narrow field of responsibilities.

A pertinent example is the destruction of the well-regarded Commonwealth Employment Service, and its replacement by a morass of contracted bodies, expert in optimizing revenue raising strategies such as internal mandated “training” courses by associated bodies, and other well-honed revenue generating strategies not detected or corrected by the limited oversight now afforded them by the public service.

As Sasse et al identified (2020), outsourcing for 40 years in the UK did not produce all the benefits promised, and [by that stage] increasingly both private and public sector organisations were insourcing core capabilities, sometimes due to improved efficiencies, but often to achieve improved quality of services and policy agility. Historically, outsourcing public services has not been particularly successful, for many reasons:

1. A profit motivation will always create a downwards pressure on scope and/or quality of service, especially for the sorts of long-term contracts established for service delivery
2. Public services must serve 100% of the population, not just the most profitable, an operating model most companies are not built to support, creating inequitable results
3. In outsourcing service delivery, public institutions also effectively outsource their relationship to the public, creating challenges for trust and legitimacy

Once this process of outsourcing specialisations had gained momentum, the reality of assumed availability faded. Many of the internal specialists had been very good in their fields, with the combination of expertise and experience in government, and swiftly found posts or positions in other countries or indeed in other fields. Many of the contracted specialists had the necessary expertise, but without the context and experience of application in government, an enormous amount of domain knowledge was lost. The second order effect is that the networks which were shared between externalised experts and the remaining managers swiftly fell apart as the common ground disappeared, and with it, corporate and institutional memory.

This process is painfully apparent in public service, as the skills regarded as appropriate to be held on a continuing (and promoted) basis shrank over time to the limited purview of policy, corporate management and procurement. Even grants management became something to consider for outsourcing, with several public approaches to market manage grants programs. Surely managing public funds on behalf of the taxpayer is a core capability in a public service and shouldn't be subject to the pressures and disincentives of a for-profit incentive system? Even debt collection became outsourced with devastating impact, as was documented through the Robodebt Royal Commission.

As the institutional memory declined, even the limited purview of expertise became ineffective over time. How can you select the highest value option without having the expertise to identify what is "good"? How can you engage in contract management if you don't understand the output or outcome being delivered? How can you engage with experts from a position of no expertise? "Value for money" became a compliance box-ticking process, where subject experts within the department, if they still existed, were purposefully kept at arm's length from procurement and contract management decision making, often white-anted by consultants brought in to validate poor decision making and projects.

This downward spiral of trends acted to reinforce a prevailing political purview that the public service was entirely contestable, and only had a role to disseminate funds, get out of the way (deregulate) and to unquestionably do what they're told. The critical role of the Australian public sector to be a steward of long term social and economic stability, to drive sustainable policy outcomes and public good, to create policy, to warn, guide, review or provide alternatives to positions favoured by ministers, or to be an active part of society became lost, and replaced by an urgency-driven and task oriented managerial mindset, thus disempowering the entire workforce from delivering genuine or evidence-based public service. Evidence and experience to the contrary was seen as inconvenient, contestable and ignorable.

The effects of this slow moving but effective destruction of the ability for public institutions to deliver or administer their core functions created a flood of implications for the public sector, and for society

more broadly. Once this habit of outsourcing gained momentum, even the managerial responsibilities of the public service led to a flight to safety in contracting. Companies became not only the “go to” contractors for specialised skills but became even more trusted than public servants to write policy, diluting and obfuscating core strategic functions of the public sector. As internal expertise became undermined, so too was the ability to judge and assess contract delivery, leading to situations where two parts of the same outsourcing company would be providing consulting to one part of a department on the strategic and policy direction, and another part would be providing implementation services. This pattern of engagement even led to the situation where some consultancies were advising departments how to exercise their goals while at the same time advising other clients how to avoid these same measures, which was a predictable result based on the natural motivations of all involved. It reinforces the need for public institutions to have the minimum viable expert competencies to administer their core functions independently, such that vendors can be selectively engaged and managed, where appropriate, as support functions, not to run the place.

8. Reduced visibility and disengagement of public servants and expertise

Expertise is not just necessary for an informed, effective and high integrity public administration, but has a direct and causal relationship to public trust and confidence in the public sector. The incremental silencing of public servants over recent decades has created a vacuum of public sector expertise which has had two unfortunate and significant side effects.

Firstly, it has become an accepted public narrative that public servants are collectively “less than”: less competent, less knowledgeable, less connected, less innovative, the list goes on and on. This rhetoric creates a dangerous impact on lowering public expectations and trust in public servants, and thus lowering public confidence in all that is administered by public servants, and lowering the status and professional respect of the public service. Even responses to members of the community in the public servant’s own expertise remain unanswered, public data withheld,

and these actions further reduce both the public service but also their political masters. This doesn't just impact the morale of the public sector workforce, but negatively impacts recruitment, retention and of course has the inevitable impact of exacerbating the gap between experts and decision makers, as laid out above.. The invisibility has created an environment where the public sector has become a favourite punching bag, which has in turn dehumanised public servants and made department leadership uncomfortable to own their own public narrative.

There was a time when being a public servant in Australia was considered a respectable or even prestigious job. For many years, the role of shaping a nation was considered one important enough to only trust to those who could pass a high bar of intelligence and morality (including a public service examination), with experts welcomed, engaged and empowered to help ensure the best possible and evidence-driven policies and programs were delivered. This is still the case in many countries, but there has been a growing narrative built in recent decades, particularly in Australia, where public servants that are “less than” provide a convenient scapegoat for politicians, the media and anyone to blame for anything they like. The fact that public servants have been increasingly pushed to disengage with expertise internally and externally, and have systematically lost the skills and confidence to participate in or contribute to the public domain (with the minister increasingly owning the department narrative), has created a perfect storm where public servants have been unable to demonstrate or to repudiate these narratives of incompetence. This has been compounded by recent and largely imported conspiracy theories of a “deep state”, in which public servants are upheld as being simultaneously incompetent (at anything) and entirely competent (at undermining their political masters), a cognitive dissonance only possible to maintain by the desperate or devious.

The second significant side effect of reduced visibility of and access to public sector expertise is the negative impact on public trust and confidence in all that the public sector administers. With uncertainty, costs of living and fear all on the rise in our community, this is particularly dangerous because a growing distrust in public servants and public institutions creates distrust in all that is administered by the public sector, including public services that people otherwise rely

upon as well as electoral integrity. The public sector is responsible for taxation, social services, critical infrastructure, standards, finance, national security, international trade, border control, disrupting crime, national statistics, emergency management and so much more. When distrust and indeed, disdain of the public service grows, all of these responsibilities start to be impacted, whether through public dissatisfaction, fear or disengagement, or internally through creating barriers to public servants effectively doing their job. When even the facts and authoritative information published by the public service become contested, then it becomes very difficult to distinguish between signals and noise in society. There are exceptions to public distrust of course, such as the currently reasonably high public confidence in our electoral system. But as we have seen in other countries, even that can be worn down significantly and rapidly when the public significantly comes to distrust “government”.

This vacuum created by invisibility was initially and easily filled by politics, think tanks and private sector actors driving their own agenda. More recently the vacuum has been inundated by vast and insidious amounts of misinformation designed and increasingly automatically generated to drive social division, distrust, radicalisation, profit, ideologies and chaos.

So how did this happen? The reduced visibility of public sector expertise came about in how the following patterns intersected and became mutually reinforcing:

1. The functional segmentation introduced earlier meant experts were divided into different cost centres, with different leaders, working on different objectives, unsupported and often actively discouraged from working in a multi-disciplinary way. This structural separation systemically made **public sector expertise invisible to itself**. The functional segmentation impeded cross functional, cross cost-centre and cross-portfolio networking across the public sector and between disciplines, followed by the inevitable reduction in networking with other sectors, which also, in turn, degraded the level, quality, and speed of expert advice, as it became increasingly narrow in scope and experience

2. This disconnectedness has been most damaging in the disconnect that grew **between the public sector and the research sector**, with the shared pressure to act like businesses driving a wedge between policy makers and independently expert academics, creating a vacuum filled by vendors and special interest groups
3. The rise of generalist management created a **cultural incentive for managers** to avoid bringing specialists and subject matter experts into the room with senior executives, decision makers or ministers. After all, the experts might introduce pesky facts or undesirable analysis into the room or otherwise might say something a generalist manager didn't understand. Ironically, an increasing lack of access to and visibility of genuine expertise creates a barrier to building trust with highly engaged ministers and their staff, creating an incentive to increasingly distrust, ignore or explain away the advice of the department as uninformed, even when it is informed by deep expertise and experience
4. This led to a pattern of minister's increasingly relying upon experts in the ministerial staff or private sector with the presumption that "contestability" of public sector expertise was an inherently good thing, exacerbating the unfortunate and at times dangerous pattern of only heeding public sector expertise and advice when it was convenient to do so and aligned to ministerial objectives. This in turn created the pattern of creating "**policy-driven evidence**", a perversion of expertise, where evidence is selectively used to support or drive a political or policy objective
5. **Policy became reframed as only advising the government** (ministers & cabinet) of the day, as is found in the latest "Delivering Great Policy" framework (APSC, 2024). Compelling writing skills became the domain of an increasingly communications-based approach to the policy profession and public service more broadly, lacking in and separated from the necessary domain expertise and analysis skills required to formulate robust policy of all kinds (legislative, regulatory, advisory, operational, etc). Policy teams were encouraged to become generalists, and expertise became something considered, at best, something to engage, but not held within the policy team, nor the senior executive service

6. The functional separation from above meant policy teams were generally not involved in policy delivery, and the **gap between policy design and delivery grew**, creating invisibility of the necessary expertise or experience to genuinely deliver and continuously optimise policy outcomes over time. As a result, policy as a capability lost both the expertise and robustness of evidence-driven policy development, but also the purpose and point of good policy: to drive a measurable, meaningful and sustainable impact. As policy skills and expertise degraded, and the ability for policy professionals to recognise or engage with expertise diminished, a crisis of policy competency emerged, as has been articulated in review after review (including [Ahead of the Game in 2010](#), the [APS Review in 2019](#), various [APSC Capabilities Reviews](#), audit and Senate Inquiry reports and more)
7. The establishment of **professional media and communications teams** created a control mechanism over the relationship between public servants and the public, making public sector expertise in all forms increasingly invisible in the public domain. Public servants that once engaged directly and proactively with stakeholders, experts and communities as part of the day-to-day job, found themselves having to refer all “public engagement” and “communications” activities through the media team. Media and communications teams immediately became a high-pressure bottleneck but were also trained (and motivated) to manage public expectations and messaging, rather than engage collaboratively with the public. This “commsification” of public institutions undermined authentic engagement with expertise outside of and across the public sector, creating a substantial barrier to public participation in policy making, governance or oversight mechanisms. This also led to a highly effective mechanism to constrain and shape the public narrative about public institutions and the public sector as a whole while simultaneously reducing the credibility of the public service to experts in the community – and of experts still within the service.

8. This led to public institutions increasingly **deferring their public narrative and visibility to the respective ministers and their offices.** Ministerial media teams naturally want to manage and control all messaging about their policy agendas, but this resulted in public institutions losing control of their own narrative and becoming seen as increasingly synonymous with the government of the day rather than as politically neutral, independent or trustworthy. This led to a pattern of behaviour where public servants were increasingly unwilling to engage with the public or with evidence/expertise, because if either contradicted a political direction or position, the public servants were put in a difficult position with very little support to act upon or advise in contradiction to the minister.
9. This also led to an increasing issue where the public don't distinguish between 'government' and the 'public sector', which impacts negatively upon public trust in public institutions, creating a trust deficit and challenge for perceived legitimacy in the actions taken by departments. There is now as a result a common and rarely disputed public narrative that assumes **private sectors are inherently better than public sectors**, and by extension assumes public servants to always be barriers to the good: ignorant bureaucrats that couldn't deliver to save themselves. This narrative is both insulting and untrue for most public servants, but it is an easy and popular bandwagon for people to jump upon given most public institutions don't actively maintain their own public narrative, nor act to correct the record when they are targeted. Corporate narratives and consultants naturally have much to gain from this narrative, as it justifies their existence and vast expenditure, so they are naturally motivated to lobby ministers and senior executives to believe it too.
10. With the last decade rise of social media, public servants were at first able to use new channels to engage with the public, but this was quickly placed under the control of media and communications teams, who established formal social media accounts to repeat and amplify formal messaging and communications which, as per above, was increasingly reflective of or generated from the aspirations of ministerial offices. Public servants became discouraged from

participating in the social media public domain, not just where it might create questions of political neutrality, but increasingly due to a fear of any perceived contradiction with the current or any future government political agendas. This increasing invisibility of authentic public sector expertise in the most historically visible of all public spheres, contributed to a vacuum of expertise and critical information held by the public sector. The invisibility of and inaccessibility to public sector expertise is now almost complete, not just hidden behind a wall of professional and political communications, but obscured by a sea of misinformation, fake accounts and bad actors. The general public doesn't even have a consistent or easy means to tell whether critical information provided by a public institution is authentic, a dangerous situation. Prasser (2023) nicely sums up the current state of politically motivated and selective approaches to evidence: “(w)hile this phenomenon is not new, the complaint is it is becoming worse, caused by increasing societal polarisation, and social media that gives too easy access to information of questionable rigour.”

A development frequently encountered by experts in the community is a lack of any response to questions posed. This lack of responsiveness can be a reaffirming indicator that the public sector is incompetent or uncaring, even if somewhat unfair given the constraints and pressures laid out above.

A recent example experienced by one of the authors is when he posed the question “what are the SIDRA settings for a state major road intersection, seen by a community expert as becoming dangerous and in need of review?” SIDRA has become the standard software used to set intersection traffic controls, not only in Australia but globally, and the answer should have come by return from any basic traffic control engineer in the public service. However, the lack of any answer to such a simple (albeit domain-specific) question for nearly two years implies state transport authority no longer has the expertise to understand, let alone answer, such a question is a worrying trend. State roads are the responsibility of the state roads body, and cannot be responded to by the local authority, with structures or government also creating additional challenges for community experts to engage effectively with public sector.

Whilst professional communications teams bring useful skills to the sector, there has emerged three unintended and highly challenging consequences of public sector ‘commsification’:

- **Marketing doublespeak** has seeped into all forms of government communications, to the detriment of clear, meaningful and authentic language. You can pick up the executive summary from any two departments and you’d get the same references to ‘synergy’, ‘efficiency’, ‘streamlining’ and a focus on ‘customer experience’. This is often not just the communications teams pushing colourful language, but senior executives who want to sound more business-like. This use of marketing language makes it hard for the public to understand or trust public institutions and does little to differentiate the purpose and mission of public sectors trying to support good public outcomes. This problem is best articulated by Don Watson in his book, *Death Sentence* (Watson, 2003)
- **The decline of verifiable facts in the public sphere.** Public and research sectors have a lot of information, data and facts at their disposal, including high value publicly funded research, and things for which public sectors are uniquely authoritative on (statistics, economy measures, weather data, etc). It is critical that the public service publishes data and these facts in a way that isn’t about a good news story or trying to reflect the policy of the government of the day. Of course, people will debate about whether all things are facts, but as a basic principle, if public sectors don’t publish facts for which they are uniquely responsible, then who will? To not do so doesn’t just erode public trust in public institutions, but contributes to declining public and business confidence, a vacuum of information easily filled by misinformation, and negative impacts on international relations. We have all seen facts interpreted as ‘bad news’, and then spun, obfuscated or silenced by communications strategists, and yet it is in the authoritative data held by government that we can support an informed, evidence based and innovative society. Increasingly, information is being quarantined and blocked from public access. A mix of ‘security theatre’, ‘faux privacy’, and the delays in FOI access reinforce the perception of a

tamed and non-communicative public service across the board. A recent example of a correction to this pattern, but one of significant concern was the unavailability of road crash data, which led to the Automobile Association of Australia running a national public campaign to get this critical data into the public domain across the whole country. Another technique clouding access to public information is to make it a charged product – even though it has already been developed with public funding

- **The silencing of valuable public sector expertise.** Public servants are an extremely diverse group that make up almost 2 million people across federal, state and local jurisdictions in Australia. This workforce includes designers, technologists, operations, front-line staff, economists, scientists, educators, infrastructure expertise, intelligence specialists, lawyers, regulators, managers, legislative drafters, policy experts and many more, some with many decades of lived experience. When public service professionals can participate in the public domain in the context of their professional expertise, it contributes great value to the public sphere, improved trust between those who serve and those who are served, and importantly, it creates a mechanism for continuous learning and development of public servant skills and expertise. It also creates an opportunity for greater and more genuine public engagement and participation in policy and design of public programs and peer review from different experts across society. Obviously, this doesn't mean sharing secrets or classified information, but there is a great scope for and benefit from genuine engagement between public servants, the community and other sectors

Recent developments in policy making for children, the elderly, and women have all run into requirements to codesign with the community, to respect and enable agency of the subject parties, and for collaborative policy frameworks developed with their direct input. If, for instance, the elderly were engaged and provided some agency in redesigning aged care policy and legislation it could change the power relationships involved, something resisted by some of the privatised bodies who have benefited from the power differential (and which have

been comprehensively discredited by the Royal Commission into Aged Care). It is timely here to remind readers that the lead author is very elderly.

Today, even highly competent and expert public servants are made invisible and constrained from being able to engage with other experts or the invaluable expertise of lived experience. All of this has created a situation where public servants have become systemically separated, from each other and from society. Separated from and invisible to the “Australian public” they are meant to serve.

9. Urgency-driven operating models lurching this way and that

By the 2020s, several generations of public servants and contractors were in place that had never been taught public sector tradecraft, nor had experienced what a genuinely politically neutral, highly engaged, highly expert and effective public institution might look like. As public institutions with generalist leadership increasingly and systemically lost connection with their purpose and deep expertise, the main pressure upon departments became the ebb and flow of political urgency and an increasing tempo of public emergencies (health, natural, social, etc). All the processes, communications and structures of public institutions became stuck in a state of constant flux, lurching from one urgent priority to the next, and from one restructure and machinery of government change to the next, constantly trying to reflect the changeable and often conflicting goals of subsequent governments. Even budgetary and resource planning in public institutions became optimised around the agenda of the government of the day, losing the stability and grounding of constitutional, legislative or public purpose.

In this context, several consequences emerged:

- Departments became incentivised and rewarded by investing in and proposing programs aligned to political interest, either **avoiding or having to hide the necessary minimum viable investment in their own foundations**. Core systems, capabilities, and the constitutional/legislative responsibilities of departments are often

of less immediate interest to the current minister, and public service leadership lost the ability and sense of stewardship to invest in themselves

- The efficiency agenda laid out above created a perverse incentive to simply do “more with less”, leading to the **perpetual patching and straining of legacy systems and processes**, rather than strategic or systemic investment in purpose led transformation or innovation to adapt to changing times
- True emergencies have often been dealt with more effectively, by drawing upon emergency powers that give the opportunity to cut through legacy processes and systems. But after each emergency, rather than capitalising on or normalising new approaches, **legacy processes were seen as necessary to return to**, and investment and prioritisation efforts always returned to the latest political or urgency
- The relatively new requirement to get political (Cabinet) support for any new investment led to core systems and capabilities becoming stale and unfit for purpose over time, creating a **legacy of technical debt**, contributing further to urgency-driven operating models that also had to increasingly react to critical systems becoming at risk of failure
- The increasing and now perpetual budgetary pressures created a **culture of prioritisation driven by urgency and a “return on investment”** imperative rather than policy efficacy, public outcome or any measurable impact
- All of this created a **systemic inability to plan forward or respond to change** with adjustment in the implementation of policies

A behavioural pattern emerged, where public servants are encouraged to take complex (and often highly emotive) subject areas and break them down into technical constructs. This has been referred to as “rendering technical” by Tanya Li (2019), which is problematic firstly because it systemically removes humane and values-based approaches from policy design/delivery by framing problems (and their solutions) in a way that

produces technical, palatable and repeatable solutions, and secondly because it tends to produce short term and narrow solutions that don't address root causes.

Urgency-driven operations have also been enabled by a lack of clear or consistent purpose across the sector. By the 2020s, many public institutions in the APS don't have a clear, measurable or long-term purpose, let alone an outcomes driven plan or approach to program management. Urgency and reactivity had become the dominant driving force, driving a culture of resource competition and mutual suspicion between functions all trying to outbid each other for a slice of diminishing resource pie, demanding investment in real (and conjured) crises, risks and emergencies.

The inability of public sector institutions to systemically adapt to change has been clearly exposed by climate and health emergencies (including COVID) for which emergency powers were heavily leaned upon to get anything of substance done in a more adaptive way. Those same public institutions then largely reverted to "normal" practice after the emergency rather than using the experiences to evolve their operating models to be adaptive and agile all the time. Emerging technologies and disciplines have also challenged the status quo but are usually contained by compartmentalised adoption that doesn't change the overarching structure or operating model of a department.

The crisis paradox means that in an emergency, the pressures and issues that emerge create an appetite for reform while at the same time perpetuating behaviours that simply throw more resources at how things are currently done, which of course perpetuate the issues that emerged. The lack of corporate memory and purpose often have led to a reactive approach to mitigating the risks of change, rather than what could be a course correction approach towards better realising public and policy outcomes through change.

When purpose and measurable outcomes are the dominant gravity in any system, they provide not only a counterbalance to the pressures of day-to-day urgency, emergencies and pressures, but can also provide a persistent pressure for stewardship, including to consider investment through the lens of impact and sustainability. Impactful investment can

support decision making to stop ineffective programs or systems, rather than just efficiently doing ineffective things, ideally providing a counterweight to rebalance the unending and increasing pressure of urgency.

10. Institutional stagnation, incapable of responding to continuous change

As expertise and decision making became miles apart, and as public institutions became increasingly generalist, structurally fragmented, focused on communications over good policy or delivery, increasingly reactive to politics and urgency, perpetually distracted the effort of constant structural change, and faced with the genuine challenges around legacy and decades of underinvestment in critical systems and core capabilities, a new challenge emerged.

Public institutions began to lose their institutional knowledge and memory, and began to systemically and structurally stagnate. Gone were the days of programs with multi-disciplinary teams that engaged with the public to design and deliver measurable and purposeful impact for the public. Instead, now existed functionally and structurally fragmented groups of people, largely blocked from working collaboratively on real outcomes, and instead systemically pushed to be in a perpetual mode of panic and reactivity, often divorced from the ability day-to-day to drive meaningful or strategic outcomes.

Expertise, where it exists, is not often invited into strategic planning. But with the reduction in robust policy expertise, “strategic consultants” have become increasingly relied on to develop the policy positions and strategic direction of public institutions. To get good advice genuinely heard and taken seriously, many APS experts learned to engage with these consultants and prime them with their advice, who in turn would often repeat the same advice to generalist managers, who would take it more seriously due to coming from outside the department. Unfortunately, the short-term gains for internal experts in participating in this charade have been undermined by the systemic strengthening of the role of external strategic/business consultants, leading to the further weakening of the authority and trust in internal expertise.

Because aspiring public servants were encouraged to explicitly not have expertise in the senior executive service, a systemic inability and cultural barrier to understanding and maintaining institutional knowledge and memory emerged. This issue has been exacerbated by the relatively recent pattern of purposefully and continuously moving of generalist senior executives around the public service, creating an increased cognitive load of continuous change for all involved, and a negative impact on morale, productivity and impactfulness. How would you feel if you got new boss every couple of years, each likely to start from a position of distrust with you just because you are a domain expert or have been there a while?

Finally, knowledge systems were often the early casualties of efficiency agendas and of the political prioritisation of funding, creating a lack of persistence in domain knowledge, lessons learned, history and what has or hasn't worked in government both within departments, and across the jurisdiction. The institutional memory of departments is now largely in the heads of long term (and increasingly retired) staff, or documented in the knowledge systems of vendors, and in either case this institutional knowledge is largely not informing or driving decisions or forward planning. Didn't George Santayana eloquently warn us back in 1905 that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"? Yet we have created structurally reinforced institutions of forgetfulness, lurching this way and that, with a diminishing and increasingly disempowered proportion of the workforce with the expertise or experience to know better to remember.

It is critical for public institutions to acknowledge and systemically address institutional amnesia. Recent research into this problem in the APS was in the process of being finalised and published by the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, at the time of writing this book. It will be useful to analyse once available, and is called "How Do Changes in Institutional Memory Affect Public Policy Processes?" A well-structured corporate memory system should be considered mission critical. This role is not solely for the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and not solely for archival or records units: they must be a central aspect of all public service operations and should be created and safeguarded to withstand reorganisations and relocations.

Much of the expertise deficit happened in the lead up to the hyper-connected, digital and globalised world we now live in, with its accompanying exponential increase in the speed and scale of change. The rates of change in society and economics are now much faster than decision cycle times in the public service, leading to a lack of policy and operational agility, with last minute fixes to risks that are often not noticed until they are well escalated, without funding, capacity or operating models able to quickly and automatically respond, nor utilise domain expertise and community engagement to adapt and iterative policies, programs and services appropriately or effectively.

The consequences of an expertise deficit

An expertise deficit in the public sector has enormous consequences, not only for the effective and efficient operations of public institutions but for society writ large. In short, the main impacts are below, which are laid out in detail in the appendix, with each section linked for convenience:

- A trust deficit: disengagement, selective evidence & echo chambers
- A context deficit: when business methods are blindly applied to public services
- An institutional memory deficit: the impact of an expertise exodus
- A policy deficit: increasingly insular and self-perpetuating views
- A sustainability deficit: increasing focus on efficiency at the cost of longevity
- A regulatory deficit: increasingly ineffective and mis-incentivised systems
- A values deficit: the structural perversion of NPM & politicisation
- An engagement deficit: the rise of labelled experts at the cost of broad engagement
- An academic deficit: the impact on academic engagement and intellectual rigour

So how can we address the expertise deficit? Before you start a new journey, it is important to understand the desired end point, so let's define where we want to be before we explore how to get there.

PART 2

Where could we be tomorrow?

Defining “good”: The shape of minimum viable public sector expertise.

“Some go this way. Some go that way. But as for me, myself, personally, I prefer the short cut.”

– THE CHESHIRE CAT, ALICE IN WONDERLAND

“What we should be asking is not whether we need a big government or small government, but how we can create a smarter and better government.”

– BARACK OBAMA

It is difficult to effectively or sustainably improve a situation unless you can clearly articulate a better future state – a destination that is different from the current state. Too often, problem solving is based on a deficit planning mindset and models which might remediate an issue today, but often leads to a reappearance as the context and cause that created the problem has not changed. “Problem solving” is usually just symptomatic relief by another name and can perpetuate or even exacerbate causal issues by directing resources into band-aid solutions, allowing the underpinning conditions to ferment.

Part 2 of this book aims to paint a picture of what a desirable future state could be for a mission-based, trustworthy, adaptive and humane public sector could look like in a modern context, one which is as committed to purpose and proactively driving public outcomes and measurable benefits as it constantly adapts to change. From a desirable future state picture, we can extrapolate the minimum viable likely expertise needed, both old and new skills, and the operating model required to pull it all together.

There are four areas we explore on defining what “good” looks like for modern public sectors:

1. The constitutional and legislative context
2. Desirable characteristics in a modern public service
3. A sustainable and mutually reinforcing governance ecosystem
4. The characteristics of a modern public servant

Part 3 of this book will provide some ideas on how we could get there from today, a loose roadmap for systemically and permanently addressing the expertise deficit.

Constitutional and legislative context

In Australia, the public sector plays a special role in our society. Australia is a modern “social libertarian” country, where the public sector provides a range of free or heavily subsidised services including public health, education, transport, social support and much more. The Australian public reasonably expect public services, and expect the public sector to fulfil its Constitutional and legislative responsibilities. So, when narratives from other countries and contexts emerge, like the American idea that “small government is good government”, they don’t often, easily or comfortably translate into a local context or expectations.

The Australian constitution articulates the division of power between the states/territories and the federal government, providing the highest authority on the shape of expertise needed for these two layers of the Australian public sector. Individual public servants and all public service executive leaders should be distinctly aware of the constitutional context and authorities of their jurisdiction, their portfolio and their department, and should ensure a suitably diverse and sustainable pipeline of expertise, both within their ranks and from across all sectors.

For instance, the federal government of Australia has constitutional responsibilities for international and Australian trade and commerce, defence, postal and telecommunications services, banking and insurance, foreign policy, citizenship, taxation, pensions, census and statistics, welfare payments, currency, national health policy, copyright and more. It stands to reason therefore, that the federal government has domain expertise in all these areas. The states similarly have standalone and some shared domains of responsibility, which should inform at a system level the core capabilities and expertise required in the jurisdiction.

Whatever the jurisdiction, there will be an equivalent **constitutional or foundational framework** that should help define and shape the minimum viable expertise needed to effectively and responsibly administer the constitutional responsibilities of the jurisdiction. Ideally

there would be a department responsible for ensuring these core capabilities dictated in the constitutional framework were planned for, rather than each department planning for themselves in isolation, which can create gaps of competency in meeting the constitutional responsibilities of the jurisdiction.

Beneath the authority of the relevant constitutional foundation, there is also the **legislative and regulatory context** of each department/ portfolio. This provides the second layer of domain expertise that senior public servant leaders should have deep knowledge of, to inform workforce, structural and operational planning for their department. A department may choose to leverage a combination of internal and external expertise, with effective strategies to maintain the minimum viable internal expertise necessary to sustain and engage effectively with experts outside the department. At a group, division, branch or section level, it is usually necessary for leaders to prioritise the expertise they need to simply fulfil their most immediate and necessary functions, but at the senior executive level, it is critical that the department-wide workforce planning take into account and plan for the domain expertise needed to deliver on the constitutional and legislative responsibilities of the organisation.

There are major areas that are jointly the responsibility of states and Commonwealth — education and health, in particular — and can be treated differently in each state.

Finally, most public sectors might reasonably be expected to have a **clear and overarching purpose** that informs and helps align culture, operations and efforts across the jurisdiction. For example, the *New Zealand Public Service Act 2020* defines the purpose of the public sector as:

“The public service supports constitutional and democratic government, enables both the current government and successive governments to develop and implement their policies, delivers high-quality and efficient public services, supports the government to pursue the long-term public interest, facilitates active citizenship, and acts in accordance with the law.”

The Australian Public Service does not yet have a clear and common purpose statement. This creates a continuous cycle of existential questioning and presumed contestability of all the public sector does leading to short term decision making and inconsistency of service and approach across the sector.

Desirable characteristics of modern public sector

Adding a modern context to the constitutional competencies, the much abused ‘codesign’ term needs to be treated with real respect and engagement required to be genuine. As the public service inhouse skills have faded, those in the community have risen. This provides both a rationale and a method for addressing what is needed today and for the future. The continued ghosting of community expertise is not a survivable strategy, and the use of a narrow range of often-ex public service consultants needs urgent revision.

How might we move our public sector from the following current state to a better future state, namely:

CURRENT STATE	FUTURE STATE
1. From a purpose vacuum compounded by “efficiency agendas”...	...to being genuinely mission and purpose driven , proactively delivering on the constitutional and legislative responsibilities and verifying that this is the case..
2. From “government as a business”...	...to values driven, humane and empathetic public services, policies and institutions, characterised by contextual and measurable benefits to the community that can be verified by the community.
3. From systemic undervaluing of expertise with generalist managerialism...	...to a confident and modern workforce where expertise and public sector trade craft is valued, developed and engaged in all aspects of policy/ governance, engaged meaningfully with community expertise.
4. From ghosting and gaslighting expertise...	...to being high integrity and credible public institutions, where public servants and public sector expertise are celebrated and participating in the public domain.
5. From functional segmentation and isolationism creating a barrier to meaningful outcomes...	...to being effective at collaboratively delivering policy and public outcomes .
6. From increasing politically reactive planning and resource allocation...	...to a balanced and trustworthy approach , that serves the government, the Parliament and the Australian public, delivering on core responsibilities and maintains public trust.
7. From the enticing snake oil of contestability and “risk transference”...	...to confident public institutions that facilitate, steward and proactively deliver public outcomes .
8. From reduced visibility of public sector expertise.	...to being an engaged, inclusive and participatory democracy and public sector.
9. From urgency-driven and reactive operating models.	...to being evidence-driven and sensitive to change and unanticipated impacts with an adaptive and responsive operating model.
10. From complete institutional amnesia and stagnation.	...to effective custodians for long term knowledge retention, transparency and continuous learning.

Characteristic 1: Mission and purpose driven

From a purpose vacuum compounded by “efficiency agendas” to being genuinely mission and purpose driven, proactively delivering on the constitutional and legislative responsibilities and verifying that this is the case.

What could it look like to be truly mission and purpose driven and how would that be different from today? Mission-driven could mean that the prevailing gravity, preference and incentives are directly linked to the intended purpose and relevant outcomes that align to the mission. A mission/purpose is ideally grounded in the constitutional basis, public sector purpose, legislated role and the mission statement of the department, subject to the culture and historical context of the jurisdiction. Ideally there is also an overarching and agreed purpose for the public sector in that jurisdiction which provides some consistency and means to collaborate across departments for broad and necessarily cross-functional and cross-portfolio policy and public outcomes.

To become mission and purpose driven also requires a clear definition of “success” that is measurable, which clearly (and regularly) drives decision making and prioritisation in the department. For example, if an overarching department mission was to keep Australia safe, how is “safe” defined and measured, and what are the indicators that an action, program or investment are effectively driving that intended outcome? How is that outcome weighed up against competing priorities, and how could that outcome be measurably supported or enabled by corporate investments like data infrastructure, staff training or better HR systems? How does the department mission intersect with other departments/jurisdictions, and how does that contribute to program planning, design, delivery and cooperation with other organisations?

A mission and purpose driven organisation should have a long-term plan with a clear north star (ideal future state) that drives efforts and all decision making. Every short-term program, investment or deliverable should be able to demonstrate how they are aligned to and contributing towards the long-term objectives and always improving the impactfulness of the organisation. All staff should similarly be able to articulate the long-term objectives and how they are contributing to them every day. These long-term mission objectives should not be

constrained to what is possible in the short-term future, but rather should represent the best possible future state realisation of the mission. This provides a constant gravity and aspiration for staff to plan for and work towards, and helps ensure that emerging technologies and opportunities are more strategically used to augment, amplify, broaden and dramatically improve the impactfulness of the organisation, not just to repeat the current state (and inherent limitations) with shiny new things. Without a mission-based ideal future state to work towards, public servants often get caught in a deficit program planning trap, where investments and efforts are targeted at an increasingly small percentage of the relevant problem space, with diminishing returns for the mission.

Fundamentally, decision making in public institutions is heavily driven by how funding is sought, allocated, prioritised and managed. So, a mission and purpose driven public institution would have a sustained and proportionate approach to planning and decision making, one that maintains a healthy and relatively consistent balance between **mission expenditure** (program/policy expenses) and **enabling expenditure** (corporate/support expenses). There will always be a need to invest in corporate services and foundational infrastructure but even then, corporate investment and efforts should align to the mission and purpose of the organisation, and should be able to demonstrate how they measurably contribute to the organisations mission and purpose. In any case, enabling expenditure should be capped within an organisations budget to not become unintentionally prioritised at the cost of mission expenditure, except where a measurable impact for the mission is demonstrated.

A mission driven public institution would also monitor for the efficacy (impactfulness) of all investments to ensure prioritisation of what actually drives the mission, not just what is urgent or drives short term benefits/efficiencies. There is no point investing in more efficiently doing the wrong thing or low to zero impact activities, so proactively measuring, monitoring and prioritising for the intended mission impact is critical for organisations to maintain a pressure and trajectory of mission-enabling decisions and efforts. If part of the purpose of the public sector is to deliver value and benefit to the community, then it is equally critical that public impact be built into the success measures,

prioritisation framework and decision making of the organisation, to measure, monitor for and actively manage (and at times mitigate) the intended and unintended effects of policies and programs. This could be achieved in two ways: through incorporating broad measures of quality of life; and through measuring value to the public. For quality-of-life measures, frameworks such as the “Measuring What Matters” framework (Treasury, 2024) or the NSW government “Human Services Outcomes Framework:” (NSW government, 2024) provide examples of how a consistent approach could be applied to all aspects of budget planning and prioritisation. There is also a strong need to engage with culturally inclusive quality of life measures, especially with Indigenous communities. On public value, it would be helpful for departments to ensure all major programs and policy areas are required to measure and monitor the broader impacts and value to the public. For instance, understanding the comparative social harm of different illicit goods might help to prioritise intervention efforts that best help the community, which also helps communicate the often unseen benefits to the community provided by the public sector.

Finally, we need to replace the language of business with the language of purpose. The language and practices of “business” has infiltrated all parts of the public sector, to the point where policy/program and corporate goals are conflated under the same banner of “business outcomes”. As a result, many staff are unable to easily differentiate whether they are delivering something that drives the mission, or something that delivers a functional goal or corporate efficiency. The best critique of this issue is available in Don Watson’s timeless *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (Watson, 2003). Too often, a “business outcome” is defined as a corporate efficiency, addressing a staffing risk or securing funding. These are important matters to address but are distinct and ideally secondary considerations to a policy or mission outcome. Program and policy areas could choose to adopt a “mission mindset” rather than a “business mindset”, with language, practices and prioritisation aligned to their mission. For instance, rather than defining “business requirements”, public servants could define meaningful “mission requirements”. Rather than “business outcomes”, perhaps it is more useful to talk about policy outcomes, policy impacts or national opportunities. Perhaps rather than “business owners” we should identify functions as program or policy owners?

Rather than the relationship between corporate functions and policy/program areas being overtly defined as an internal customer/vendor relationship, a shift towards mission based organisations might include establishing collaborative and cross functional teams so that corporate and enabling functions like ICT, HR, data and property work in genuine partnership and collaboration with policy and program areas and can bring their full skills to driving the intended mission outcomes.

Characteristic 2: Values-driven, humane and empathetic

From “government as a business” to values driven, humane and empathetic public services, policies and institutions, characterised by contextual and measurable benefits to the community that can be verified by the community.

A more humane public sector that actively applies values and empathy needs to adopt a more humane language and approach in how the (often challenging and stressful) work of the public sector is conducted, at all levels. This means actively trying to avoid the temptation of rendering policies and programs technical (Li, 2019) but rather trying to empathetically engage in both the breadth of complexity and in addressing causal factors. It means including analysis of engagement with and measurement of community (and individual) impacts into the success, decision-making and prioritisation frameworks of public institutions. It also means encouraging and celebrating all staff to bring their empathy and humanity to the job every day. To worry a little less about the “front page test” (where the prevailing concern is how something might be portrayed on the front page of a newspaper) and worry a little more about the “grandparent test” (how one’s grandparents might reflect upon the fairness and ethics of the matter).

A values-driven public service isn’t one that is simply governed by a common set of values (like the APS Values), but perhaps one that strives to continuously understand and reflect the changing values of the communities served. A humane public service is perhaps one that can systemically optimise for the most humane approach in all actions, that demonstrably and visibly improves life for the public, and is able to detect and remediate harms from public policies, services or programs

if and when they emerge. An empathetic public service is perhaps one that members of the public feel safe to engage with, understood by, and that reflects this understanding in the language and actions of programs and publications.

The hardest challenge for the public service to be more humane is to address institutionalised cultural homogeneity. There are a lot of deeply embedded assumptions and ways of working that are seen as normal in public sectors that have the effect of quelling diversity of thinking, practices and knowledge systems. Exploring different ways of thinking and doing is too often seen as a nice to have, rather than a crucial way of including genuine diversity in the workforce culture. Designing inclusively is starting to become more understood as having value, but often through the lens of more efficient service delivery to more people, rather than the more useful lens of developing policies and services that are informed by more diverse ways of thinking and working and are more aligned with the values of the community. Perhaps the idea could be adopted that public institutions operate best when they are proactive enablers for human dignity, including cultural dignity. The convergence of all treatments to a convenient homogeneity might make management easier, but this strategy is unlikely to be welcomed.

Another strategy would be for all public servants to learn how to connect to Country in their work in the public sector, and in their lives as people living in Australia. This would provide the connection, context and practices for a more genuine, respectful and partnership approach to engaging with Indigenous communities across Australia and would also provide a means to engage across our diverse cultures and communities. After all, the one thing we all share is that we live and work on Country, alongside the oldest continuous cultures in the world, cultures with deep knowledge of this land and all that inhabits it, and deep knowledge of how to sense and adapt to change as it occurs. We have a lot to learn from Indigenous knowledge systems, and public servants can strive to be exemplary in Indigenous engagement and partnership.

Characteristic 3: A confident and modern workforce

From systemic undervaluing of expertise with generalist managerialism to a confident and modern workforce where expertise and public sector trade craft are valued, developed and engaged in all aspects of policy/governance, engaged meaningfully with community expertise.

The public service is the longest running and persistent part of many nations. Companies come and go, but public institutions persist, albeit with a few name changes and shifts in roles and responsibilities. As such, it is critical that the public service workforce is able to maintain not just confidence and core capabilities required to administer the massive responsibilities of the sector, but also the confidence to act as stewards for the long term and to continuously identify and adopt new skills, new technologies and new practices so as to maintain impactfulness, continuity and the best possible public outcomes in an ever changing global context.

A confident and modern workforce would ideally have:

- **Deep public sector and domain expertise with persistent institutional memory** to effectively administer the responsibilities (constitutional, legislative, mission) of the department in a trustworthy way, while optimising policy outcomes and public impact
- **Skills and methods to support collaboration, continuous learning and innovation** to ensure the workforce can cross-functionally and collaboratively deliver, improve, learn and confidently apply new skills, methods and technologies over time, including to adapt to and harness change effectively and adapt as required
- **Effective system design and transformation skills** to design a value-based future state realisation of the mission/purpose of the organisation, and continuously identify, sustainably plan for and address emerging challenges, opportunities and threats

- **An adaptive, enabling and empathetic leadership culture** to ensure the workforce has the delegated authority, trust and support of their senior leaders to confidently deliver public value each day, especially when it is challenging, ambiguous or urgent
- **Continuous and genuine public engagement with expertise** across sectors and with the communities being served. This necessarily includes the skills and incentives to involve the public in the design, delivery, reporting and continuous improvement of policies and programs over time

A confident and modern workforce also requires a confident and modern approach to training, recruitment and retention, where HR policies and processes are considered the most humane and engaged of all enabling capabilities.

Characteristic 4: High integrity and credible

From ghosting and gaslighting expertise to being high integrity and credible public institutions, where public servants and public sector expertise are celebrated and participating in the public domain.

To become high integrity and credible, both in reality and perception, the public sector needs to own its own narrative, celebrate what it is to be a public servant (and why it is deserving of respect and pride) and actively participate in and contribute expertise to the public domain.

Public institutional narratives should persist through electoral cycles, aligned to their purpose and community expectations, and should earn and maintain community trust. When the only messaging about a public institution is from the minister of the day, the narrative becomes perceived as political, and brittle in the face of subsequent electoral cycles. When the public servants of that institution are entirely invisible in the public domain, is it so surprising that people question the competence and expertise of the organisation, particularly when they don't agree with a particular policy or program?

The poor standing of the idea of a “public servant” is so profound that there are some public servants who now reject the characterisation, thinking it to make them seem less than the deep experts they are. But

a “public servant” could be better understood as something to aspire to. It is critical that the characterisation of public servants is improved. Public service should be celebrated and positioned as a respectable and prestigious career, where people can make a difference for the nation and community.

Finally, it is critical that public servants be supported to re-engage with the community without having to be managed through the media function. Many public servants benefit from and provide benefit to the community by participating in professional networks, community activities and even online discussions. Public servants have a lot of expertise to share but also can stay better connected to the public they serve when part of the job is to engage regularly and confidently, day to day. This kind of operational engagement would greatly help to ensure policies, programs, services and all that the sector does is better informed by public needs, expectations and values, and would help the public to see and feel more confident and engaged in the public sector efforts that shape their lives.

Credibility and integrity by extension also require a genuine level of expertise held by genuine experts. There is almost no point having a public narrative or engagement entirely shaped by generalists or media teams, as the deep insights can be lost in translation through the process. So public servant expertise needs to be visible, involved and participatory in the process of public engagement, so as to learn and to build public trust and confidence in public institutions.

Characteristic 5: Collaboratively delivering outcomes

From functional segmentation creating a barrier for outcomes delivery to being effective at collaboratively delivering policy and public outcomes.

While different functions (and disciplines) within public institutions are structured and budgeted in isolation from each other, there will always be a barrier to collaboration within departments. While departments are given funding to deliver an outcome in isolation from other departments that necessarily have a part to play in delivering

that outcome, there will always be a barrier to collaboration across departments. And while public servants (particularly senior executives) believe and operate on the presumption that their mandate and work program is directed from above, there will always be a natural resistance and disincentive to collaborative across sectors and with the community.

Collaboration only works when there is a shared goal/objective, complementary values and capabilities, and shared investment/resourcing towards the outcome. When working together is the easiest path to success, rather than an inconvenient, compliance or risky venture that puts the people involved in a position to fail.

As such, becoming effective at collaboratively delivering policy and public outcomes necessarily requires for outcomes-based funding to be extended into:

- **outcomes-based structures** for better internal cross-functional collaboration
- **cross-departmental funding**, where there is a shared goals and each department is measured on how their policy interventions contribute to the outcome
- **purpose/mission-based programming**, where there is always a proportional approach to the resourcing which responds to and allocates part of the department resources to new ministerial/government objectives, but where there is always sufficient resourcing protected to deliver on the core mission/purpose of the department
- **participatory governance**, where the public is engaged in the design, delivery and ongoing governance of policies and services

These four tactics would greatly help to create the right persistent incentives and a natural motivation for public servants at all levels to want to collaborate with expertise outside their areas. We will delve into participatory governance in Characteristic 8 (Engaged and Participatory) and focus on how to overcome functional segmentation in this section.

Characteristic 6: Balanced and trustworthy

From increasing politically reactive planning and resource allocation to a balanced and trustworthy approach that serves the government, the Parliament and the Australian public, delivering on core responsibilities and maintaining public trust.

There are timing issues that cannot be ignored in any public service context. Most national or complex challenges and opportunities take more than a single political cycle to be developed and delivered, but political cycles do not necessarily support a stewardship or long-term approach to public service. Public servants are often simultaneously pulled in different directions. On the one hand this is normal as public servants serve many purposes with changing leadership over time, but it is critical to find systemic ways to maintain balance and not be drawn into overserving one part of the system at the cost of the others.

The *Australian Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) laid out as its first main objective “to establish an apolitical public service that is efficient and effective in serving the **government**, the **Parliament** and the **Australian public**”. This objective provides the basis for a mental model for Australian public servants that can help maintain the balance needed to deliver sustained public outcomes, engagement and trust. It makes it possible to always bring the work of public servants back to a purpose driven approach. One that serves the government of the day but does not do so blindly or at the cost of parliamentary oversight or public good.

If we were to consider these three masters like the legs of a stool, then we are most stable when we have equal pressure and responsiveness to all three. By considering all legs of the stool as both necessary and helpful (in different and sometimes challenging ways), this can help ensure the best public sector work and outcomes. When it is framed, even subtly, as the minister and department versus the world, things quickly fall out of balance. Perhaps genuinely seeing the Parliament and Australian public as natural partners and necessary guardrails for the work of the public sector would naturally lead to better outcomes, engagement, openness, peer review, robustness and a better balance for maintaining a values-driven and evidence-based approach.

If all public servants were to regularly consider the government, the Parliament and the Australian public as three guardrails, three masters that should be served in as balanced a way as possible, it provides three key benefits:

- a helpful gyroscope – an internal balance against becoming either too politicised or too rebellious, providing a strong and sustainable foundation upon which to serve all three without being perceived as swinging any way too far at the cost of the others
- a greater perception (from all three “masters”) of being the trusted, professional, expert, apolitical, evidence-based, and values-driven voice in the room, which grows trust in government services, law, regulation, and legislation
- a naturally more robust basis for engagement with a greater breadth of skills, expertise, and experience to draw into the important work of policy and legislation, regulation, taxation, service delivery, and other critical functions of the public sector

Arguably, much of the challenges we face in public sectors today arguably traces back to this balance being lost or at various times being too skewed towards any one leg at the cost of the other two. This challenge presents a real problem to public sector effectiveness, public trust, and sustainably delivering long term and persistent public outcomes.

The public service can best serve the government by providing frank, fearless and evidence-based advice, including discussion on what is desirable, technically feasible and economically viable. Many ministers are certainly interested in evidence, ideas, expertise, and realities faced, particularly when trying to implement new policies or understand existing ones. They want to hear about new challenges and opportunities, which are often most obvious at the coalface of service delivery, regulation, or policy development. They want to know the risks and ‘bad’ news so they have a chance to do something about it, and they certainly want to know about associated costs. Elected representatives are responsible and accountable for the policy decisions they take, and the public sector is tasked, among many other

responsibilities, with the responsible and lawful implementation of those decisions. But there is also a significant amount of public sector work and efforts where the direction is defined by legislation, the constitution, case law, international crises, emergency response efforts or indeed by the needs and values of the communities we serve. This means on any given day there is an active balancing act required to serve the government of the day while also maintaining the purpose and mission of public institutions and the sector as a whole.

While there is great scope for innovation and ground up proposals from the public sector, public servants don't have unfettered rights to divert all efforts away from policy directions that have been reasonably and lawfully provided by the government of the day. At the same time, the majority of the work of public sectors is usually not affected by changing government policies, as there is so much established in legislation, the constitution or existing operations, so there is a lot of scope for apply an innovative, evidence based and values driven approach to the work, always accountable to but less affected by changing policy landscapes that is often presumed. Public servants should certainly not feel they can't do anything without the say so of their minister, and when the heads of departments are perceived as purely political appointees, this has often impacted upon practical and cooperative apolitical engagement with parliamentary processes and with the public.

How the public sector can best serve the **Parliament** is at least twofold: provide oversight, and as the 'doing' arm of the legislature. For oversight, public officials need to be able to justify to the Parliament (through estimates committees and other oversight mechanisms) how the policy was implemented, what advice was given, decisions taken, outcomes achieved, and how money was spent. As the legislature, the Parliament is responsible for debating, improving, and assuring all new legislation and laws, so the public sector can assist with providing appropriate facts, evidence and modelling to support the best possible legislative outcomes, including of proposed amendments throughout parliamentary processes. Of course, sometimes these responsibilities can be subjected to political theatre, but they are important points of intersection between the public sector and Parliament, and it is the job

of public servants to occupy this space calmly, professionally and from a balanced position of evidence, to always help ensure the best public outcome prevails.

How the public sector best serves the **Australian public** is also something important to consider daily. On the one hand, public engagement can greatly assist in developing user-centred and test-driven policy options, designing better services, social, or economic interventions, or myriad other opportunities to engage people and diverse expertise and experience in developing the services and laws that everyone relies upon. On the other hand, being accountable to the Australian people and to ensuring the best possible public good is a helpful lens to apply to all our work. Serving the Australian public is about actively trying to work in the open, provide transparency, contribute information to the public domain and invite public participation in all aspects of public administration. The public sector has an important role to provide information and facts as a trusted and apolitical voice in the public domain.

The skills needed to maintain balance are therefore easily derived from a goal to actively serve the three masters above:

- The deep understanding and skills of public sector craft, and how to translate new methods into the context and necessary constraints of public sector
- The domain expertise needed to deliver on core department accountabilities
- The ability to define, measure and monitor success from a government, legislative/constitutional, policy and public perspective
- The skills to partner, co-design and collaboratively deliver policies and services
- The access to and skills to understand and apply institutional knowledge and lessons learned from the past to a current context
- Strong governance skills, and knowledge of government and parliamentary mechanisms, along with legislative and constitutional domain knowledge

Maintaining balance is important, but equally so is earning and maintaining public trust.

Trust can be broadly defined as a willingness to believe that a person or entity is operating:

- a)** in good faith
- b)** with integrity
- c)** in a way that fulfils the individual's expectations of that person or entity

Public institutions (and, by extension, public sector systems) could build trustworthiness through:

- a)** demonstrating good faith (through a systemic and measurable commitment to human-centred and humane outcomes)
- b)** guaranteeing high-integrity systems (that are lawful, verifiable, accountable, accurate, high veracity, assured, consistently applied and appealable)
- c)** demonstrably meeting public expectations (by reflecting public values and needs, doing no harm, being transparent and operating within relevant legal, social, moral and jurisdictional limitations of power)

Characteristic 7: Confident stewardship of public outcomes

From the enticing snake oil of constant contestability and “risk transference” to confident public institutions that facilitate, steward and proactively deliver public outcomes.

Rather than continuously questioning the purpose, suitability and contestability of core public sector functions (especially those articulated in constitutional and legislated authorities) and wasting efforts in perpetual cycles of insourcing and outsourcing, public

institutions would instead put their sizable resources and efforts into confidently owning their core responsibilities, and continuously exploring how to best improve their impactfulness and outcomes. This would lead to greater existential confidence and the ability to build long term and sustainable alliances and partnerships with academia, communities and purpose-aligned organisations, rather than losing the connectedness of shared purpose through a fog of contract management or proxy relationships via vendors. Public institutions would have the expertise and incentives to actively own their delegated authority and responsibilities, engaging vendors and contracted parties to supplement rather than displace the core internal competence and deep expertise required to properly steward their accountabilities, mission and the related policy and public outcomes, along with the long-term decision making and the relationships needed to drive complex outcomes.

Departments and all staff would be confident to be proactive, to lean in and continuously innovate on how to achieve the best possible policy and public outcomes for their domain of responsibility rather than waiting around for direction. They would actively propose new policy proposals where new or changes to authority is required and would be responsive to and actively balancing the responsibility to serve the government, the Parliament and the people of Australia, earning and maintaining the ongoing trust and confidence of all three.

This confident stewardship would need to be complemented by a **sustainable and participatory public governance ecosystem**, where naturally motivated partnerships and contracted services are designed and actively managed to drive and optimise policy and public outcomes over time.

Characteristic 8: Engaged and participatory

From reduced visibility of public sector expertise to being an engaged, inclusive and participatory democracy and public sector.

In a modern democracy, public engagement and active participation in policy, delivery and governance provide both the key to better policy and services, and a means to understanding and responding in closer

to real time the changing needs and values of those we serve. This is critical not just to be responsive, resilient and relevant, but to maintain trust and confidence

Unfortunately, many people assume public participation in a democracy simply means voting every three years or submitting requests for information. But in an era characterised by perpetual and increasing speed and scale of change, active involvement of the public in day-to-day public administration presents opportunities for better government, including the design, delivery and governance of public policies, services and institutions.

When people or organisations that will be affected by a policy or program are involved in the process there is a better chance of success, not just by bringing in their diverse experience, expertise and natural motivations of the community, but by establishing greater buy-in and support prior to anything being finalised or launched. Getting diverse voices in the room means the work will naturally be more inclusively designed and more likely to help more people, noting that ‘diverse’ necessarily means going outside of the public sector and outside of “key stakeholders”. Stakeholders are more likely to think in terms of self-oriented interests (family, property, business needs), whereas diversity is more likely to result in more inclusive design and better public interest or common good. In service delivery, this is often done through user research, so why not in policy or legislation? And why not include the community in governance rather than just research, testing or ideation? In New Zealand, the SmartStart life journey public service (for birth of a child) has a highly effective and cross sector advisory group that includes the national midwives organisation and a key child health organisation to help inform and prioritise the program and service design around real community needs. New Zealand also used to have a participatory policy mechanism called “citizen policy juries”, which would engage a demographically balanced group of citizens on a paid basis, not unlike a jury, to contribute to major policy development. These kinds of participatory governance provide a mechanism for values-driven public administration, and a healthy motivation for all participants, including the departments, to actively prioritise the best possible outcome for the people and communities affected by the service or policy.

Secondly, participatory public governance provides a means of scaling impact, particularly given the constant and unrelenting pressures on resources. There will always be people or organisations who are naturally (systemically) motivated to do things being done by the public sector. Consider also those who are under or unemployed, ‘retired’, on parental leave, or just looking for new experiences, how might we engage their experience and expertise into participatory governance? Perhaps public institutions could leverage natural motivations in the community by increasing visibility, such as publishing regulatory self-assessments which would be of natural interest to the clients, staff and competitors of regulated entities, to drive institutional nudging towards the regulatory outcome rather than just increasing efforts to prioritise which decreasing percentage of regulated entities a regulator can afford to assess. “Many eyes make all bugs shallow” is a tech community idiom relevant here, and participatory governance provides many more eyes.

Thirdly, participatory public governance helps maintain a more evidence- and outcomes-based focus on the work. All projects in government are subject to the same intrinsic pressures of any other organisation: politics, competing budgets, restructures, prioritisation, egos, etc. It is sometimes deeply frustrating to see genuinely good and well supported ideas be de-prioritised for arbitrary reasons, especially when the long-term or public benefits are demonstrably significant. When departments build participatory governance into the BAU work and program, there is a powerful mechanism and incentive to take a genuine evidence-based approach and prioritise what is most needed in the community. You can only get so far in tweaking existing systems, and analysis of the data you already have from systems already in place generally only provides a basis for minor tweaks or nudges that may not get the intended policy outcomes. When new policy positions are developed through participatory processes, the results are test-driven, evidence-based, values-based and more trusted and draw on history and diverse experience.

Finally, public sectors play a special role in many societies, including Australia, to serve the community and promote greater public good. Public good is also a core value or tenet for most public servants. So, it is both interesting and important to consider the idea that ‘good’

may be different for different people. What is ‘public good’, and how does it change as societal norms evolve over time? If you don’t keep your finger on the pulse, how do you know when change occurs? To deliver ‘public good’ necessarily requires continual engagement with the public we serve, in all its diversity, to understand what good means and how public values change over time, especially in an increasingly and continually changing national and global context. Taking a values-driven approach to public management isn’t about just defining core values but also understanding and reflecting the values of the people and communities served, which means staying engaged with those communities.

All of this requires a cultural, structural and operational shift to embrace and value public engagement by all public servants. An engaged and participatory public sector is even more important with the rise of misinformation, which can make it very difficult for everyone to discern fact from fiction. The replacement of person-to-person communications by intermediaries such as communications teams, chatbots and automated decision making has sharply reduced public servant to citizen communications. There are many constraints now built into the system due to a top-down perspective that assumes that direct contacts are all simply channelled into predefined existing areas. Codesign with communities has been replaced by direct contacts with named experts, missing the broader knowledge, experience and expertise of the communities affected. The much-overlooked flexibility of experienced citizen contact staff to handle such issues has been severely limited by the removal of such intelligent and flexible interfaces to what are, in most cases, quite complex questions bridging more than one predefined area. A simple but largely completely neglected measure would be to enable and support engagement of communities earlier by public servants as part of normal business.

Of course, public participation would be much easier if public servants worked more in the open. There will always be exceptions to the rule, but the adoption of a “need to know” culture created an issue where everything is considered secret by default, creating a shroud of opaqueness to the public in everything we do. There is an opportunity to be a little more critical in the application of “need to know” to higher classifications of information, and to embrace “open by default” to less

classified ways of working. Sharing ideas openly, progress, research outcomes, hypotheses, early prototyping or early drafting, these all provide a means for interested citizens to follow along, contribute when they can, and build trust and confidence in the end result. Working in the open used to be a popular technique in Australia and many governments around the world, and we all benefited from both the transparency and engagement on websites, operational blogging (regular sharing of work that fell outside of the scope of official communications) and social media. Working in the open should be considered a necessary tool in the toolbox for participatory policy and governance, and public servants should consider themselves part of civil society, not somehow separate from it.

Characteristic 9: Evidence-driven, adaptive and responsive

From urgency-driven and reactive operating models to being evidence-driven and sensitive to change and unanticipated impacts with an adaptive and responsive operating model.

No public institution or public servant can afford to sit still or keep doing the same thing over and over. Effective policies require continuous adaptation to a changing world, which means a necessary shift to continuous design, continuous monitoring (for change, effectiveness and impacts) and continuous optimisation and improvement to policy interventions, regulations, services and public institutions themselves.

Too many people associate “evidence-driven” with early policy development, but it should be considered a part of all aspects of public governance on an ongoing basis. Being evidence-driven requires a continuous pipeline of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, from diverse sources to ensure a holistic understanding to inform holistic decision-making and improvements.

Public institutions have traditionally provided public feedback opportunities or consultations on government policies but increasingly have prioritised mechanisms to measure and capture the “customer

experience” of people interacting with government services, without easy means to share broader concerns. While this feedback is necessary for improving the experience people have with public services, it has created an unfortunate narrowing of the scope of public feedback, which misses key opportunities for policy reform, participatory governance or unintended impacts.

Broader feedback, such as unintended impacts or feedback provided by the community, is often reserved for royal commissions or inquiries. These mechanisms are necessarily slow and much contested, even in their initiation, through the obvious intersection of political and public service interests. It is not possible to continue with this remarkably slow process in a time of substantial – and arguably accelerating – change in everything from environment and population to climate and trade barriers and even security challenges arising in many areas of the world.

Data can and must be complemented by qualitative and open feedback mechanisms so that anyone can contribute their expertise and experience into the mix. This provides a way for clients, staff and advocates to provide open-ended and continuous feedback to help policy administrators actively and adaptively manage the intended and unintended impacts of policies and services. More attention must be paid to tracking and understanding the present and adapting to change. Monitoring intended and unintended impacts (policy, human, environmental etc) of policy interventions (including services, regulations, grants etc) in real time provides the ability for public institutions to detect and respond to change and to both accelerate interventions that deliver benefits, while remediating ones that create harm.

Characteristic 10: Effective custodians for institutional memory and continuous learning

From complete institutional amnesia and stagnation to effective custodians for long-term knowledge retention, transparency and continuous learning.

The final desirable characteristic of a highly expert, modern and trustworthy public institution is to actively maintain a record of historical and continuous institutional learning, including national

strategic and policy memory as a necessary and critical foundation. Without this, institutions inevitably repeat the same mistakes and break public trust. Ideally, this would include the ability for all public servants to continuously be able to discover, learn from and contribute to a public sector knowledge commons, and facilitate public access to this information through public records to support a well-informed and participatory approach to our democracy and governance. This requires general and specific expertise in information and knowledge management, access, records keeping and archival, which should be a core skillset of every public servant, and should be supported by easy-to-use and discoverable records and knowledge management systems that are maintained over time. All reports should, by default, be centrally available to all public servants to draw on, which would both improve knowledge sharing and jurisdictional memory but would also reduce the public funds spent commissioning the same or similar work from multiple departments again and again.

A sustainable and mutually reinforcing governance ecosystem

Ideally, the public sector would be managed not only with incentives, structures and adaptive operating models that support a perpetual striving to deliver public good and the best possible policy outcomes but would be part of a broader ecosystem that is naturally motivated to each do their part for the good of society. Conversely, when all organisations are focused on the individual success of themselves, there are no shared goals or outcomes to achieve, so anyone can “succeed” individually while everyone fails collectively.

A sustainable and mutually reinforcing governance ecosystem would see different sectors (and categories of organisations) naturally aligned where there are shared goals and maintain useful tensions in the overarching system to make sure everyone continues to do their part. This approach does not ignore the fact that different types of organisations are motivated differently, but rather explicitly designs for and assumes that the natural motivations of different types of organisations are able to be leveraged if they are understood.

For instance, a scientist/researcher/academic is naturally motivated to produce an explainable, repeatable and peer-reviewed result, whereas a for-profit entity is naturally motivated to produce something that a customer is willing to pay for. Politicians (particularly in Australia, where ministers are also elected representatives) might be personally motivated to act in what they consider the best interests of the community but are naturally incentivised to do popular things that help them get elected. Natural motivations are intrinsic both at an individual level, and at a structural and functional level. A company is naturally motivated to deliver maximum profitability (especially for publicly listed entities) whereas a not-for-profit tends to measure and be naturally motivated for success according to the purpose it was established for, while also needing to remain functional. It's worth briefly mentioning that structural incentives generally outlast, influence or can even nullify the natural motivations of individuals, so it is important to ensure the

systemic incentives of an organisation are clearly designed to reinforce and incentivise the intended purpose of that organisation, which in the case of public institutions might be anything from a robust democracy to a safe and equitable society. Public servants might individually be motivated to deliver policy outcomes and public good, but if the structures and systems around them are built to prioritise efficiencies and political objectives at the cost of public good, then the individual natural motivations can become crushed or hampered, day to day.

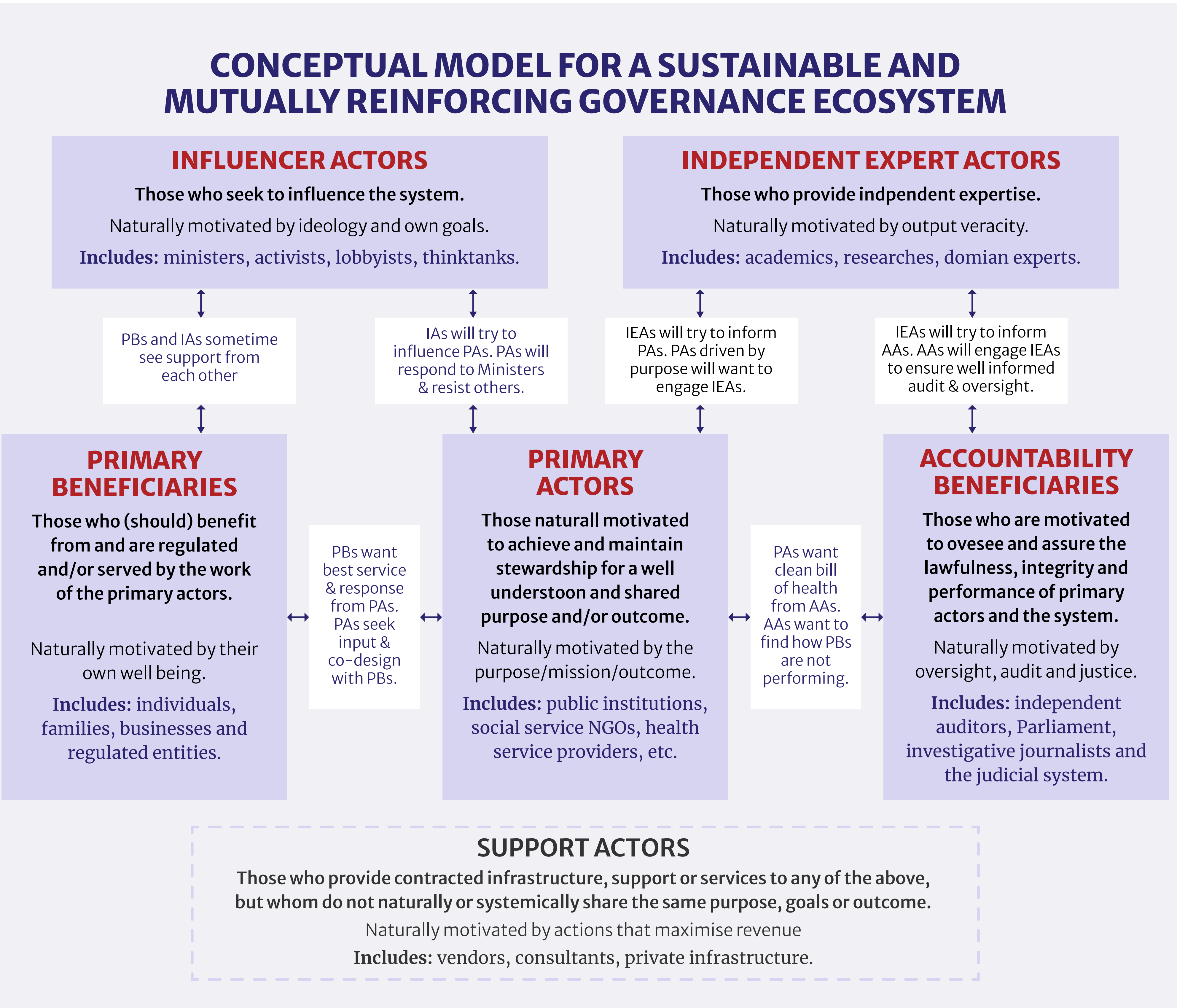
So, what might a sustainable and mutually reinforcing governance ecosystem look like? Well, it would need to have the right range of actors, motivated in mutually reinforcing ways, working sustainably, with the right tensions maintained such that the natural motivation of any one entity (or category) doesn't overshadow the rest of the system. Ideally, for any program, policy or public sector, such an ecosystem would include:

- **Primary actors** – the entities and people who are naturally motivated to achieve and maintain stewardship for a well-understood and shared purpose and/or outcome. Includes public institutions, social service non-government organisations, health providers etc
- **Primary beneficiaries** – the people and entities who benefit from and are regulated/served by the work of the primary actors and are naturally motivated by their own wellbeing, including individuals, families, businesses and regulated entities
- **Independent expert actors** – the entities and people who provide independent and parallel expertise and evidence-based advice, made free of fear or favour, where the natural motivation is the veracity of the expertise itself. Includes academics, researchers, universities and research institutions, and some domain experts in the community (active or retired)
- **Accountability actors** – the entities and people who are motivated to oversee and ensure the lawfulness, integrity, performance and accountability of the primary actors. Includes independent auditors (ideally not the same actors providing support services),

the Parliament (and related oversight mechanisms such as Senate committees and royal commissions), the fourth estate and the judicial system

- **Influencer actors** – the entities and people who are naturally motivated to influence the system directly (ministers, cabinet, Parliament) or indirectly (activists, thinktanks, lobbyists, unions)
- **Support actors** – the contracted entities that provide infrastructure, support and services to any of the above but do not naturally and systemically share the same purpose or outcome

Below is a conceptual diagram for how these actors and their natural motivations can complement and maintain appropriate tensions to support a sustainable approach to any purpose or outcome.



The key to understanding and applying the model above is not to simply map the actors in each category but to establish and maintain the most appropriate mechanisms for how each is engaged as part of the resourcing and operating model for that department, program or policy.

The characteristics of a modern public servant

We have discussed some of the ideal characteristics of a modern public sector, so what are the corresponding characteristics of an effective modern public servant? Most public services already have a list of “values” that should guide the behaviours and conduct of public servants in that jurisdiction, but below is a short list of characteristics that go beyond behaviours/conduct and into key competencies, which could be considered:

- **Confidence in public sector craft** – it should go without saying but all public servants (especially senior executives but also contractors) should know or be required to learn the basics of public sector craft, and what makes the public sector truly unique, to inform how they conduct their work and programs. This would include a functional understanding of the constitutional and legislative framework (accountabilities, limitations, obligations) in which they work, Administrative Law and requirements around administrative decisions, the funding and oversight mechanisms for government, the separation of powers in their jurisdiction (including what a right and proper relationship with ministerial offices should and shouldn't look like), and a good understanding of their authority and delegated accountabilities. This would lead to public servants at all levels confidently being able to exercise their authority appropriately, responsive to but not directed by political agendas, innovating within operating budgets and existing structures, and only seeking additional authority where it lacks. A basic understanding of public sector craft should be taught and required at all levels, including in contractors, but should be mandatory training for all senior executives, given the scope of decision-making delegated and granted to them

- **Evidence-driven efficacy** – data, impact analysis, effective feedback loops (including from staff and the public), real-time monitoring of impact and outcomes, and continuous evaluation and optimisation are all critical for public servants to be evidence-driven, not just in the advice given but in all strategic and operational activities, decision-making and prioritisation. The efficacy of investments, programs and policies should be continuously monitored and actively managed by all participants involved, working collaboratively in multidisciplinary teams. Public servants should feel and be confident to seek, present and use evidence, in all its forms, to achieve the best possible outcomes of all they do
- **Domain expertise** – every public servant necessarily works within a constitutional, legislative or regulatory context (as outlined earlier) so one of the most critical characteristics of a public servant is to have or build over time the experience and expertise necessary for that domain. Not everyone will be a deep expert in everything, but deep domain experts are needed, and everyone needs the ability to bridge and engage meaningfully across disciplines, so that domain expertise can be complemented by other expertise, and can be evolved over time to adapt to new opportunities, risks and changing needs (Wigan,2022).
- **Digitally literate** – all efforts of the public sector are now part of the digital economy, so a working knowledge of and enthusiasm for digital transformation is critical for public servants to keep pace with changing technologies, public needs/expectations, and new opportunities to improve and optimise public sector impactfulness. Any public servant who considers themselves not ‘digital’ is choosing to opt-out from the necessary role that everyone must play for public institutions to modernise and become adaptive, agile and fit for purpose in the 21st century. Digital expertise isn’t just about technology but about understanding the scale, speed and hyper-connectedness of modern society, the opportunities and risks that emerge, and the necessity to have an adaptive, responsive, evidence/data-driven, and continuous improvement approach to all aspects of modern public sectors and governance

- **Engaged and communicative** – public servants at all levels don't need to be (and preferably shouldn't be) communications experts but should have a basic competency in both communicating their ideas and expertise and in engaging across different disciplines, sectors and with the community (especially with relevant primary beneficiaries). Public servants at all levels should assume and plan for engagement and communications of their work and programs, including as much public visibility as possible, both to share and engage support for the program, but also to test ideas, to draw upon public experience and expertise over time, and to grow trust and confidence in the program and the public institution itself
- **Values-driven and compassionate** – beyond public sector behavioural values, public servants should be confident to engage with, understand and reflect the values of the communities being served by the policy or program, and to bring their own compassion and kindness to the process. It is amazing what a little kindness can bring to any situation, and in the case of the at times very large and intimidating programs that public institutions are responsible for, it pays to demonstrate and show kindness and compassion along the way, as it doesn't just lead to more humane outcomes, but also to building and maintaining public trust and confidence
- **Purposeful & adaptive stewardship** – finally, at all levels, public servants should demonstrate leadership that is supportive of everyone involved (particularly those more junior), adaptive to continuous change, and focused on the long-term ramifications of all actions. Program and resourcing should always include capacity and funding for long-term policy and strategic planning and exploration, for investing in persistent knowledge systems and skills/expertise development, and for ensuring departmental prioritisation and investment are always focused on the long-term objectives and outcomes for the public. All public servants at all levels should feel confident in advocating for the best possible outcome, seeking evidence and testing ideas, innovating in pursuit of greater purpose and impactfulness, and actively serving the government, Parliament and the people

PART 3

How do we get there?

Resolving the expertise deficit in three steps.

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

— THE CHESHIRE CAT, ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Having explored the history and current state in Part 1, and what “good” might look like in Part 2, we now provide a four-step plan to systemically and sustainably address the expertise deficit, and to re-establish a highly expert, highly trustworthy and highly effective public sector workforce.

Each is a small step for individuals but a giant leap for the public sector.

Step 1: Create a purposeful, existentially confident public sector

The expertise deficit began with a purpose vacuum, which was perpetuated by a range of actors who benefited from a weakened public sector in an ongoing existential crisis. Therefore, step one to re-establish a high expertise public sector must be the re-establishment of purpose and the existential confidence required to maintain that purpose, especially in the face of political, short-term, urgent or perversely incentivised pressures. A public institute that loses the gravity of a well-defined purpose becomes unhinged, unpredictable and ultimately incapable of valuing expertise, operating effectively or maintaining integrity and public trust.

The role of expertise of all types is central, and when embodied in individuals these are experts in a subject or a domain. How such expertise is applied is part of the political process, so it is difficult to assess the quality of these assets without some consideration of transparency or external validation of the expertise as well as the context in which they are applied. This makes expertise, public service structure and transparency all critical to rebuilding trust at a time when it has been breaking down. The cost of distrust in our system of governing is very likely to incur several extremely high costs to the society in which we live. As society increasingly distrusts public institutions, all that is administered by the public sector comes into distrust, creating a crisis in confidence and legitimacy.

Step 1.1: Establish a clear and consistently defined role of the public sector

The persistent questioning and revisiting of public sector contestability creates a challenge for existential confidence and effective delivery, especially when compounded by a philosophical ideology that the free market can solve all problems. When a simplistic “market failure” lens is applied without thought, the imported assumption that government is only here to do what the private sector won’t creates an unmerited glorification of private sectors and demonisation of public services, positioning public sectors as the problem rather than a potential means to a solution. Many people, inside and outside of government, assume that public servants can only ‘help’ by providing resources or ‘getting out of the way’, and don’t see the public sector either as a platform on which they can build or as a potential partner in solving complex problems.

“The lesson: trying to turn non-market parts of society into markets, while blithely ignoring all the obvious reasons such ‘markets’ would fail, is a fool’s errand.”

**ROSS GITTINS, CONFESSIONS OF A PET SHOP GALAH:
A LOT OF REFORM BACKFIRED (NOVEMBER 2019)**

Even the staunchest of ideologues would not propose that everything should be done or not be done by the public sector. But a prevailing cultural assumption in public sectors today is that anything is up for discussion, which leaves an existential axe hanging over them at all times.

The biggest unintended and unfortunate consequence of the constant question about whether government should be doing something is the existential crisis we see in many (but not all) public institutions. Public servants are constantly assumed to be and publicly described as “less than” those in other sectors: not as innovative, not as effective, not as capable; a second-class sector of last resort.

In Australia, as in many countries, the public sector exists to provide stability, predictability, security, a reasonable quality of life, public services, health and education, and the broadest possible social and

economic outcomes for the community. It is necessary for public institutions to perform certain foundational roles because they can do so at a scale and can deal with a high level of system complexity for increasingly diverse needs, can do so sustainably and are motivated by a public good imperative. Taking a duty of care approach means necessarily taking a systems approach, and ‘long term’ in public sector terms should be considered in decades or centuries whereby public institutions can provide a metaphorical platform on which the whole society and economy can thrive.

Public sectors should provide a useful foundation for society (and democracy). However, many people outside or coming into the public sector start with the notion that the best type of government is small and invisible, which doesn’t really align with the diversity of actual functions of our public sectors or the diverse needs of the community. Sadly, the perspective is usually backed with the argument, “well, that’s what I’d want”, which is the very worst rationale because it assumes one person’s (often privileged) experience reflects everyone else’s, which is debunked with the merest of research or service design.

We need holistic and nuanced stewardship and long-term decision-making across the public sector to confidently and competently balance proposals by highly pressured individuals and functions against the needs of the entire public sector and the diverse communities we serve. The shift to outcomes-driven public services is a useful step, but genuinely better public policies and services require a cohesive and confident culture and approach across the public sector as a proactive contributor to society and the economy, a partner in continuous improvement of our nation.

There are some things that only the public sector should do. This shouldn’t have to be said, but when everyone is under serious (and somewhat artificial) budgetary and staffing constraints all the time, it can lead to function-based decisions at the cost of the system and community at large. For instance, you can see a branch or team deciding to change, outsource or close something down because they need to reduce immediate costs, with implications for others that rely on that thing. People have been seen to suggest outsourcing key functions of

government just to meet an efficiency dividend without consideration of the short- or long-term effect of different incentives on that function. So, we need to collectively differentiate between:

1. What only the public sector should do
2. What the public sector should definitely not do
3. Where there is debate and disagreement in between

So, how can we establish a clear and consistently defined role of a public sector? Start with the basics. Purpose should be explored and articulated at three levels, each of which should influence program planning, resource prioritisation and efforts to serve the government, the Parliament and the people:

- Start with the role of the government from the relevant historical and constitutional context. In Australia, the Australian constitution includes federal responsibility for taxation, communications infrastructure, naval and military defence, lighthouses, quarantine and customs/excise, social services, marriage, weights and measures, statistics, immigration and border management, just to name a few. Everything required to administer these key areas of responsibility should be considered clear foundational responsibilities of the public sector and not contestable
- The constitutional responsibilities should be complemented with continuous public engagement to ensure public institutions reflect the changing needs, values and priorities of the communities served, and ensure effective collaboration across sectors, and that critical gaps don't emerge that could negatively impact the nation. It is critical that public institutions ensure that how they operate is designed to benefit and progress the nation. A well-functioning and independent public sector also provides a useful guardrail against corruption and potential abuse of power
- While the public sector needs to also deliver on the policy agenda of the government of the day, citizens expect public institutions to keep an eye on emerging trends and are formulating policy positions and proposals to protect and support the wellbeing of the

community. This means innovative and confident use of delegated authorities, as well as proactive engagement with ministers where new policies or proposals are required, rather than simply waiting for direction. If this proactive policy futures work is outsourced, or delivered primarily through consultants, then we lose the public servant voice of sustainable public good, and we lose the possibility of ensuring policy positions that are co-developed with citizens. Public sectors must keep a hand on the wheel while seeking knowledge and expertise from across sectors and communities. We suggest that the role of being an expert facilitator of creating balanced, evidence-based and public good policy positions is a critical one of modern, effective and values-driven public sectors

- Finally, in Australia, as is the case in many nations, the public sector is a large and influential contributor to the economy, even unintentionally. It is often one of the largest employers, manages an enormous (cumulative) budget, is quite independent from policies and programs, and actively shapes domestic markets and technological advancements through the sheer weight of public sector consumption, actions and expenditure. This includes continuous innovation and exploration of opportunities and threats, an evolving view of public infrastructure beyond roads and communications, and continuously modernising public institutions and operating models to serve a digital economy. We must consider the different incentives of different sectors and ensure it does things that align with public sector purpose and incentives for the best public good. For instance, legislation provides myriad rules by which society must depend on, and the provision of fair and effective legislation is clearly a public sector role, as is the provision of digital legislation for a digital world

From each of these, you should be able to establish:

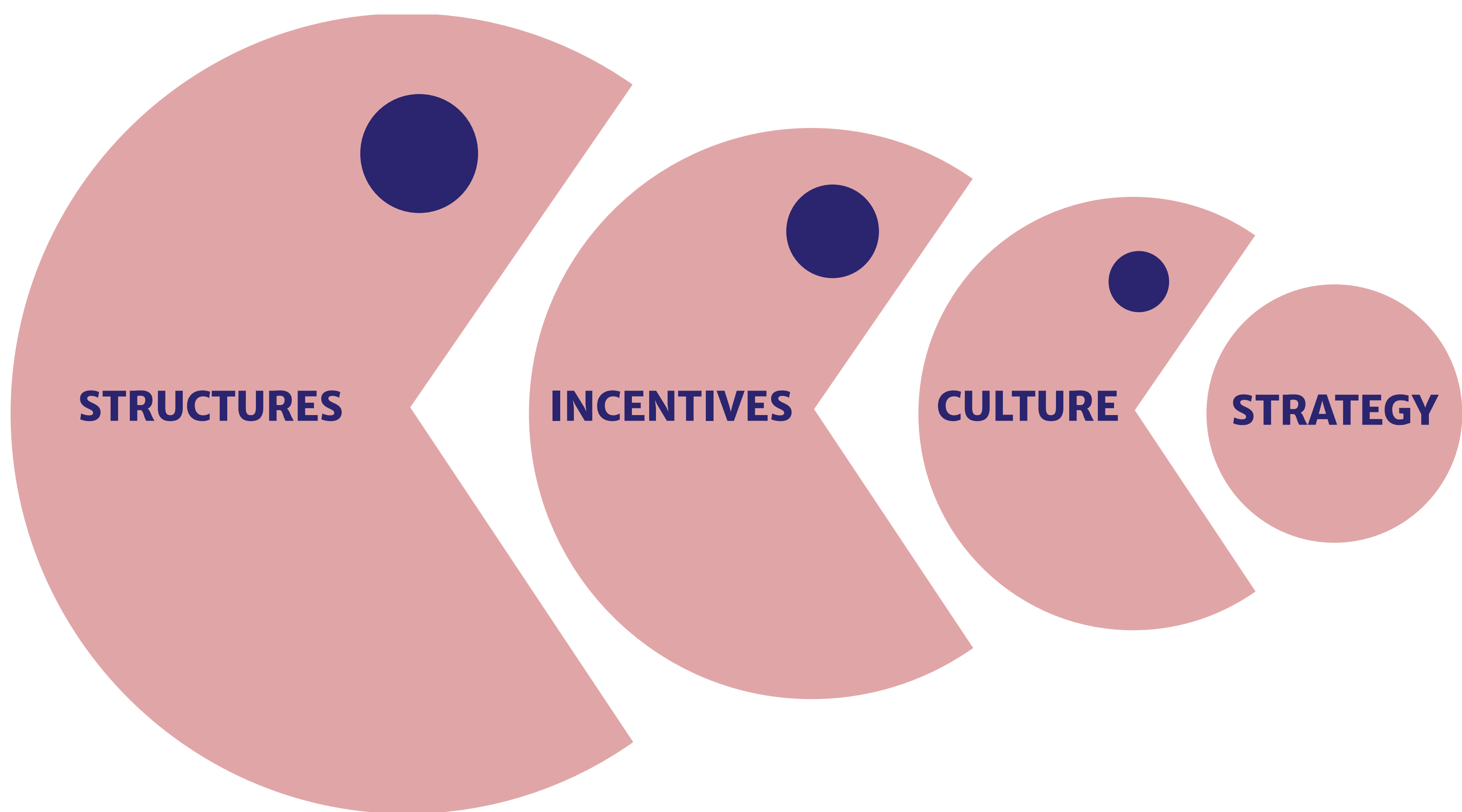
- **General purpose and role of the public sector** – in the specific jurisdiction. This will vary from society to society, is likely to be articulated in the historical and constitutional context of the jurisdiction and should evolve to reflect changing public values and expectations

- **Portfolio purpose** – each portfolio (and public institution therein) should have clarity on its purpose and the intended impact and future state it should be striving towards
- **Policy purpose** – every policy and program area should have a well-defined and documented clarity of purpose, including the intended impact or future state, how it aligns with the portfolio and societal purpose, and what relevant authorities and delegations the department has (or needs) to drive policy outcomes with integrity, accountable transparency and oversight

It would be beneficial to engage holistically and widely across sectors and communities to co-create a clearer consensus on the minimum agreed roles and responsibilities of our public sector. This would better allow the ideological arguments to be constrained to the areas of disagreement without the widespread erosion of public sector purpose and existential confidence.

Step 1.2: Establish a purposeful structure, incentives, culture and strategy

The “Pac-man” model for rethinking how government works was created by Ryan Androsoff of Think Digital (Androsoff, 2022). It provides a useful framework to consider how structure shapes incentives, which in turn shapes culture and finally impacts organisational strategy. If purpose isn’t translated into the structure, incentives and culture of an organisation, then expertise will always be seen as a mild inconvenience to an organisation that wants to continuously pivot.



Purposeful structure can be established by considering the purpose of the public institution, and structuring the organisation around the intended outcomes, with a workforce strategy that understands the minimum breadth and level of expertise required to achieve those outcomes. The establishment of multi-disciplinary and multi-experiential capabilities that can design, deliver and continuously optimise the intended policy and program outcomes is key to success in a constantly changing world. Organisations can either be structured around outcomes or around capabilities. The shift from outcomes-based structures to capability-based structures created some benefits in professionalising the capabilities but at the cost of creating systemic barriers to cross-functional collaboration. As performance criteria became capability-oriented, the cost was removing true outcomes ownership, and policy or public outcomes-based performance incentives. Swinging the pendulum back to purely outcomes-based structures would see a repeat of the issues of this type of structure, such as inconsistent implementation of different disciplines, a proliferation of bespoke and custom infrastructure and a lack of enterprise-grade infrastructure and operating models. So the answer could be outcomes-based and vertically funding structures (policy and program outcomes), complemented by horizontal capability leadership (COO, CIO, CDO etc) where the bulk of the professionals in the horizontal capabilities are actively working for managers who own specific outcomes, but applying the enterprise standards and approaches established by the horizontal capability leads.

Purposeful incentives can be achieved by introducing and normalising the continuous measure of outcomes, policy impacts and public measures of success. Most departments measure and monitor a range of indicators every day. From financial to HR to network traffic, we have a substantial amount of formal and informal indicators being actively managed, creating a web of subtle and overt incentives that shape how we behave and prioritise resources every day. One way to naturally and systemically improve the efficacy and outcomes of an organisation is to build the intended policy and public impacts into the way the organisation measures, monitors, prioritises and reports success. Ensuring all major program and policy areas are defining the intended impacts up front and then monitoring and optimising for those impacts has a flow-on effect on resourcing, investment and behaviours. This is something every public servant could choose to incorporate into their work at all levels, to each do our part to nudge the organisation towards purpose and impact. Beyond policy and program outcomes, it would also be beneficial to explicitly adopt a consistent quality-of-life measurement framework across public institutions that reflects the values of the communities we each serve to ensure our investment and resourcing prioritisation aligns accordingly. For example, the APS Measuring What Matters framework (Treasury, 2024), the Living Standards Framework in New Zealand (Treasury NZ, 2021), or the NSW government's Human Services Outcomes Framework (NSW government, 2024).

Purposeful culture can be achieved in part by aligning leadership incentives with the relevant purpose(s), rewarding the valuing of staff and outcomes delivery, and requiring senior leadership to demonstrate how they actively steward their accountabilities, deliver public value and serve the government, the Parliament and the people. Culture is only as good as its leadership, so unless there are serious reforms into the conditions, culture and accountabilities of the senior executive public service, then any reforms run the risk of being chipped away by mis- or dis-incentivised leadership. A focus on the delivery, enablement and stewardship of purpose and public outcomes should naturally flow through to how everyone in the organisation behaves, including performance development agreements, hiring practices, workforce planning, investment prioritisation, strategic decision making and governance arrangements.

Finally, create **empowered multi-disciplinary functions with appropriate incentives**. It is imperative that the skills and incentives of all those involved in the entire process of policy/program design and delivery are systemically aligned to a common, appropriate and ethical public outcome. The separation of policy design and delivery conflated by functional segmentation has created a highly challenging situation where almost everyone involved in the end-to-end policy or program lifecycle is systemically motivated to deliver their part without any reference to the intended outcome and without any engagement with others involved. Technologists are encouraged to strictly deliver to the letter of business requirements. Policy designers are encouraged to take a bird's eye view and not get involved in delivery. Service designers are often (ironically) used to develop compelling business cases but kept away from actual service development. Data analysts are asked for metrics and statistics but not asked about how to take a privacy by default approach to systems. The list goes on and on.

It is difficult to see how this can be achieved without recognising the need to change policy lifecycles, and to create responsive cultures and multi-disciplinary teams that identify all potential policy interventions, undergo speculative trials prior to finalising policy, and scale what works. Policy should be an end-to-end process. Policy design, development and implementation require a range of disciplines in the room, as well as representation of the people/organisations that will/are affected by the policy area. Underpinning this is a clear requirement for a more flexible, responsive framework within policy is enacted, implemented, reviewed and revised.

A rising issue is that the walls of disciplinary boundaries have become impenetrable. New areas of research and study are continually emerging but diverging in practice and often unable to draw deep expertise together from across different disciplines to create holistic solutions or work. Teams of different disciplines and the terms 'multidisciplinarity' and 'transdisciplinarity' are in increasingly common use. Teaching people how to recognise when they are dealing with different discipline cultures is critical to leveraging a variety of different expertise domains in a constructive and collaborative way, also to take full advantage of the creativity that flows between different cultures (professional or cultural) that engage effectively (Wigan, 2023b).

As such, it is critical that multi-disciplinary teams are established from the start of a policy or program (or indeed, as soon as possible for existing policies and programs) to own and proactively manage that policy/program for the entire lifecycle. For some policies, this may be for decades, so persistent funding, continuous succession planning, staff retention and refreshing strategies and great knowledge management are needed so the policy/program can continuously improve and optimise over time with the benefit of history and lessons learned. This multi-disciplinary team would share an understanding of the policy intent and intended public outcomes and would work genuinely and collaboratively towards always maximising impact and refreshing the target state, and could take advantage of fresh opportunities, technologies or changes in the environment, while being capable and confident to deal with new challenges.

A shared concept of stewardship and public service professionalism, based on public service values, can be complemented (but shouldn't be disrupted) by various forms of professional approaches. For instance, there is a movement to change the basis for professional ethics in IT societies and organisations from a pure business accountability orientation to a values-driven, whistleblower and colleague support framing (Wigan, 2020). This shift is important because a pure business accountability orientation can lead to compliant but harmful programs and policies.

Some necessary incentives required to be embedded in policy design/delivery teams include:

- a change in culture towards long-term stewardship of public good
- a shift in executive behaviours towards serving the government, the Parliament **and** the people (as per the Public Service Act)
- and an existential renaissance that grows the confidence of all public servants to use their expertise at all levels, driven by a clear and shared purpose and true evidence-driven work at all levels
- a variety of mechanisms available to public servants to raise concerns, both serious and simple, which would support earlier intervention when things are going wrong or in cultural or structural issues in the sector

- whistleblowing needs to be culturally supported, legally protected and considered a necessary and important mechanism to maintain a high-integrity public sector

There needs to be an operational evolution for public institutions to deliver on their fundamental purpose and to be confident to do so using the delegated authorities vested in them through legislation, the constitution or delegated from ministers. If public servants can better lean into their delegated authorities, then there could be a great deal more flexibility in innovating and driving policy outcomes end to end, rather than waiting around for new policy proposals where policies already exist.

Step 1.3: Establish and protect a culture and practice of public stewardship

True stewardship means to actively and responsibly take care of something for the long term, protecting it for future generations. For public servant stewardship, this would also require actively seeking evidence for what is working and what isn't to constantly adapt to changing needs and impacts. As such, public sector stewardship requires access to deep and diverse expertise, experience and access to evidence and institutional history and knowledge. A culture of public stewardship would help provide an ongoing appetite and demand for expertise, which would help to systemically value and retain expertise in public institutions.

Stewardship requires foundational public sector craft to be taught to all public servants, at all levels, in all roles. There was a time when every public servant had to pass a public service exam to even be considered for the sector. Today, there are a diminishing number of public servants actively taught public sector craft, especially outside of policy professionals. This lack of a general or shared understanding or approach to public sector craft across all disciplines and levels creates serious inconsistencies and incompatibilities with how expertise is applied or modified to the special context of government.

It also creates inconsistencies in how public servants exercise their delegated authorities and accountabilities, and how they engage with ministerial offices. Many public servants today genuinely believe they need ministerial approval for operational policies or decisions, and many ministers believe they have the authority to direct departments well beyond their authority, including on operational matters. Until this imbalance is rectified, expertise and evidence will be continuously under pressure to avoid creating a problem for public servants who don't understand their responsibility to use evidence to drive decisions, operations and delivery, not just to provide (or shape) advice.

The expertise that would be the **most** sought after, valued and empowered in an outcomes-driven stewardship organisation would be the skills, experience and breadth of expertise that directly contributes to that mission. It's about identifying these skills as primary expertise domains for the organisation, supplemented (not supplanted) by generalist and enabling expertise areas. Ideally, all public servants in an organisation should deeply understand the mission, purpose and authorities of that organisation, could demonstrate how they take a stewardship approach in all they do and complement their role-based expertise with public sector craft. This also requires SES leadership to engage with, value and support the deep expertise and knowledge retention of their functions, alongside requirements to balance long and short-term priorities, while actively working to serve the government, the Parliament and the people.

Of course, this would require leadership on public sector craft, something the Australian Public Service Commission is already reinstituting through a range of professions and the APS Reform agenda. As the fundamental expression of the commissioner's statutory responsibilities, there is a strong case for the APSC to lead the APS in building 'public service craft' capabilities, including all the skill sets required to operate successfully in the APS. The 2009 Review of the APSC Centre for Leadership and Learning (Banerjee, 2009) reinforces this core responsibility of the APSC to lead and support capability uplift across the APS.

An important protection for stewardship is whistleblower reform. The continued pursuit of whistleblowers Richard Boyle and David McBride implies that whistleblowing is neither protected nor welcome,

somewhat ironically hurting the ability to ensure a more effective public service. It also demonstrates that transparency and accountability are not entirely welcome, especially when they create contradictory messaging in a media narrative or in ministerial offices.

Finally, putting stewardship into practice isn't just about training and behaviours. It necessarily requires embedding stewardship into formal processes, funding, prioritisation and the very operating model of public institutions. For instance, funding decisions should ideally balance and maintain a reasonable and sustainable proportional approach to:

1. the uplift and continuous improvement of core capabilities that directly support and enable delivery of the portfolio and legislative accountabilities, responsibilities and mission/purpose
2. corporate functions that are required for an institution to operate smoothly
3. the policy priorities of the government of the day

Currently, many departments feel like they must be seen to pivot 100% of their efforts to the government of the day. However, the constitutional and legislative responsibilities of each department don't magically stop, even when a minister doesn't agree or have an interest in the entire accountability framework of that public institution.

Similarly, program planning should always be designed to include a little time for continuous innovation, feedback loops that can inform continuous improvement/optimisation, public/community engagement, for impact measurement and the ability to review and apply change regularly. Without this approach, programs too easily become set-and-forget mechanisms, unable to easily change direction or respond to change, even when they are capable of noticing things have gone awry. Proportional planning at all levels enables staff to have some capacity to innovate, grow and contribute their expertise to strategic and non-urgent matters, and collaborate and share outside their immediate team or department.

Investment frameworks should also prioritise initiatives that demonstrate measurable impactfulness and policy efficacy, not just those that promise short-term efficiencies (for reinvestment) or are

urgency driven. This requires getting off the wheel of perpetual project-based funding for core capabilities and starting to fund capabilities on a sustainable basis. This would enable continuous improvement of platforms and infrastructure within budgets, rather than the current model of seeking funding for an emergency upgrade, running that system into the ground, then seeking new funding for another emergency upgrade.

Finally, institutional knowledge is critical for long-term stewardship to be effective and sustained. This means ensuring knowledge is retained, discoverable, accessible to staff and actively curated and maintained through systems and behaviours. Otherwise, public institutions run the risk of metaphorically reinventing the wheel, over and over.

Step 1.4: Establish feedback loops and an open-by-default culture

It is difficult to be confident if you don't know how well you are performing. Feedback loops are necessary to provide continuous information about what is going well and what is not. Public feedback loops might include measuring and seeking feedback on the quality of a service, of the public experience with a department, the performance of a system, complaints or general insights, such as public comments on the policy, service or department found on blogs, social media or in the media. Ideally, these feedback loops would also include actively measuring for the intended policy impact or outcome of the program or service, as well as actively seeking and measuring the unintended impacts on communities and quality of life to not unintentionally create harm.

Staff are often the first to see or know that something won't work or if an initiative has unintended consequences, so internal feedback loops are crucial to tap into day-to-day operational experience and the deep expertise of staff. This requires systems and a culture that supports and embraces difficult feedback and doesn't target or punish staff for raising concerns or challenges.

The final feedback loop necessary for ongoing integrity and trust in public institutions is transparency. The most basic step is the most obvious: to let information and data (or at least a great deal more of it) flow free. The “need to know” culture established in recent decades, whilst important for highly sensitive domains, has created an unnecessarily secretive approach to the entire public sector. The current legislation surrounding FoI (freedom of information) might need some attention but unless it is staffed better than today, attempted appeals to FoI will only bring up confirmations of public service reluctance to respond and the delays and other barriers will amplify the lack of trust rather than diminish it.

This widespread public attitude might well be due solely to the lack of staffing of the FoI function. Reintroducing the ancient (20th century) ‘green paper/white paper’ process with supporting data might be a simple method of approaching this difficult area. Large-scale data is now a central function of government, and not all the side effects are positive, as was seen very early on in the growth of internet-enabled services networks (Wigan and Clarke, 2013).

There is a fundamental change necessary, namely to proactively make public data and information easy to find and use by the public, including performance reporting on programs, policies and services. While this might be seen by many as “constraining political responsibilities”, the drastic lack of trust in both the competence and integrity of government services makes this essential. The failures of journalism, apart from some tiny initiatives, to take a genuinely even-handed role have spread to a lack of trust that cannot readily be discharged. The contestability of ‘fact finders’ largely fails in competition to the major politically aligned newspapers’ first mover impacts and the now largely bypassed newspapers for clusters of self-reinforcing and narrow-band social media campaigns.

Reinforcing this is the recognition that digital public infrastructure needs to have a ‘public’ component (Eaves, Mazzucato and Vasconcello, 2024). It is equally important to undertake evaluations of the acceptability, understanding and usability of the digital tools — and especially interfaces — where services are to be delivered. This indicates that panels of testers (both sophisticated and intentionally

unsophisticated) would be an invaluable addition to current program implementation and that both internal and external parties be involved in this and give feedback – in many cases publicly.

Step 1.5: Redefine ‘partnerships’ and vendor engagement

The great benefit of an expert public service is that the agility of responses is far faster – or at least can be – than through long-winded writing, securing and managing of contracts. The speed of contract management is fine for some systems and services but presents great challenges where situations move quickly or are unpredictable. No one wants to be entirely limited to moving at the pace of contract change management, and yet many core government functions have found themselves now in that position.

In this environment, a lack of internal continuing expertise perpetuates a systemic incapacity and disincentive to detect or respond when a response is needed because everyone is operating within the constraints of contractual scope definition. By contrast, internal expertise that is funded and structured to continuously improve allows for problems, practical or political, to be anticipated before they hit the public sphere.

It is important for public institutions to take a balanced and strategic approach to vendor relationships, and recognise the difference between a supplier (which can bring necessary expertise, tools or services to the table but is necessarily differently motivated) and a genuine partner (which would be similarly and independently motivated by the same outcome as the public institution). A true partnership is one where there is not just a shared interest but shared investment/resourcing into the problem space.

Public institutions and public servants should carefully consider what organisations share their mission and purpose and are naturally motivated to collaborate or partner, which may include companies, non-profits, academia or other government departments or jurisdictions.

This isn't to say that relationships with vendors can't be collaborative, productive, innovative and empowering. It is simply to recognise that the nature of a vendor/supplier relationship is necessarily different than a partnership and needs to be structured and managed differently.

The core functions of a public institution should always be considered and prioritised in workforce strategies to maintain the minimum viable core capabilities and skills for that public institution, whether it be policy development, grants management, customs or taxation. When departments lose their core expertise, they become ineffective at delivering on their purpose and mandate.

Step 2: Engage, value and elevate expertise at all levels

Clear purpose, purposeful behaviours, purpose-aligned structures and institutional stewardship all rely on and therefore create a systemic and sustained demand for expertise. On the back of this demand, we can take steps to (re)engage, (re)value and (re)elevate expertise at all levels; to ensure suitable expertise is available and empowered to readily inform decision-making at all levels. To achieve this, we need to start by redefining expertise in a broader sense.

Step 2.1: Establish a broad and commonly understood definition for 'expertise'

"Expertise" is often used in a narrowly defined way, sometimes to refer to a particular discipline and often to imply something outside of the public sector. How often do you hear "the panel will have public servants and experts", like the two are mutually exclusive? Or "we need to bring in real-world expertise", implying the expertise of public servants comes from some non-real world. Within the sector itself, expertise is often positioned as a limiter on career advancement, with ambitious up-and-comers encouraged to embrace generalism as the defining characteristic of an accomplished senior executive.

But how can anyone effectively lead or review expertise if they don't understand it? How can diversity of lived experience be valued in policymaking if you only recognise formal technical disciplines as expertise? How can executives delegate decision-making to experts if they are overtly taught that experts are somehow inferior to generalists?

This chapter attempts to redefine expertise in a more useful way. It will encompass technical and experiential expertise, help position expertise as necessary for integrity and credibility, and demonstrate the need for continuous learning so that public sector expertise evolves over time and in response to real-world changes and impact.

Current definitions of **expertise** usually embed cultures within which the comment or judgment is made. This inevitably generates very different perspectives and responses. When judgments of expertise are required within a space with which both parties are familiar, this leads to excellent results. A useful example is the way in which engineers will usually seek people who have experience in the area of concern, while other disciplines may look at the degree of respect that the other parties' thinking or publications have generated. This difference is readily extended to other pairs of disciplines. This pair of frameworks is rooted in the difference in importance accorded to demonstrated experience in the engineering case and verified intellectual capacity in addressing fresh issues. Practical examples include the creation of a database by the Institution of Engineers Australia to make it easier to tap and assess delivered experiences, in contrast to the earlier creation of scientific publication abstracts as a basis for sharing and tapping intellectual capacities and the results of experiments.

Both, in the end, help to identify people who can help or contribute, and results can then be used. The cultural emphases place the weights in one direction or another but both types of expertise are still valued.

In policy areas, the number of disciplines involved can become substantial and varied. And in many cases, one culture is asked to find people or results that can be used for their issue from well outside their personal experience or knowledge. It has to be recognised that the culture of the person (or group) charged with securing support

will strongly influence the nature of assistance or support required and might equally well use very different factors to weigh when judging expertise. Naturally, the roles of networks and the personal and organisational connections will further complicate this judgment framework, as if the skills required are outside the personal scope of the selector, other factors will dominate the choice. In organisational terms, this will place trust at the core, and risk management in third-party assessments of the choices in a major role.

This outline, recognising the role that organisational and discipline cultures play in the assessment of expertise, provides a basis for considering the issue of judgment of expertise in greater detail. The overarching factors of networks, knowledge, trust and risk appear in different ways in most assessments of expertise—and in the decisions based on these judgments.

The rapid rise in the role of ICT in the disintermediation between major organisations and those they (putatively) serve has brought personal and computer ethics into a position that has as yet to be widely understood and adapted to. The consequences of these growing strains were all too evident in robodebt and are beginning to make transdisciplinarity a process and a skill that is now generating attention well outside the small clusters of disciplines where it began (Wigan, 2023). How does one judge the expertise of other parties in the more complex web of different disciplines and cultures that have now become involved? Is integrity considered? Is technical skill critical? Are results the sole arbiter? If so, what kinds? How does one assess the success and impacts from different disciplinary and cultural perspectives?

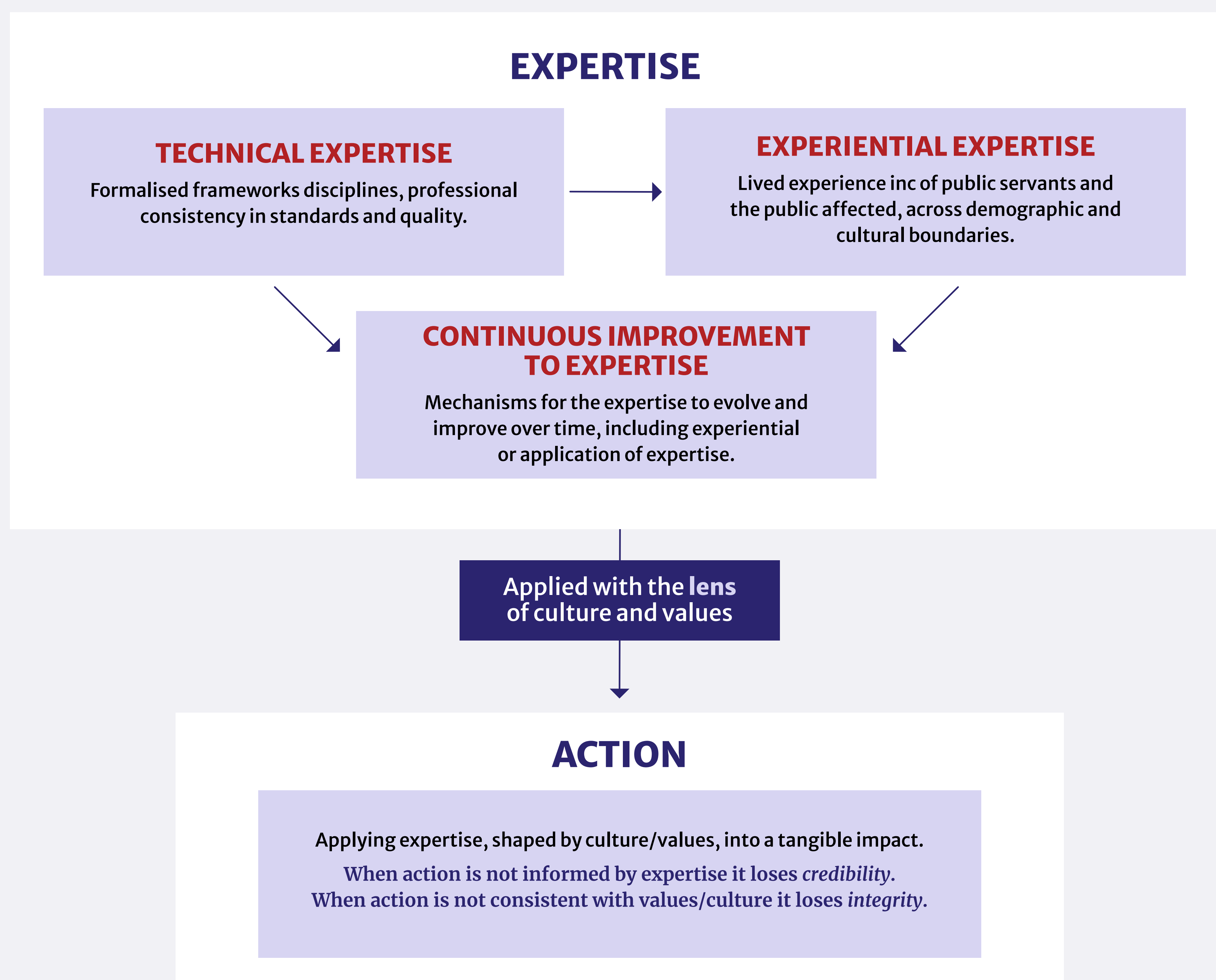
No single definition will be satisfactory to every party, but the basic requirement to make judgments and base decisions on judgments of the relevant expertise for a special task, plan, or policy means that a better understanding of the very different frameworks used by different parties is becoming essential.

The barely visible – but essential – engagement of the broader community by public servants is needed not only for securing social licence and public support for new policies but also to draw upon expertise (in all forms) available in the wider community, which has

seen massive growth in the last few decades. Policymaking bodies are not, and have never been, the unique holders of all the skills, experience and power. The roles of independent bodies like the Grattan and Australia institutes now play an active role in catalysing both public thinking and policy formation that the largely uncontested and far from visible role Centre for Independent Studies used to hold. Much of this influence is based on the expertise broadly accorded to these groups and rather less on their political alignments. Social media now generates huge numbers of respondents where the levels of expertise represented are opaque, to say the least, yet are of undeniable power.

At its best, expertise is the **lawful application** (for action and to realise impact) of **knowledge** (technical, experiential, and professional), with the benefit of continuously evolving **experience** (to learn from the past and ongoing impacts, to maintain credibility and currency), through the lens of **values** (public good, high commitment to integrity, demonstrable reflection of community values and expectations).

A useful simplification of the dynamics of the role of expertise is given in the figure below. This diagram moves the judgment of expertise and the responses to these judgments from a static to a dynamic issue, with the assumption that continuous learning does indeed take place. It also shows the application of expertise with values into action, which creates the conditions for lawful, high integrity and highly credible application of policy.



In short, expertise needs to be recognised broadly and more inclusively, and understood to require continuous improvement to ensure the engagement of expertise, both internal and external, is not artificially constrained, narrow or able to stagnate. All public institutions should be considering and building into their workforce and program planning how they systematically build, retain, engage with, validate, continuously improve and contribute to a broad and diverse range of technical and experiential expertise across sectors and consistent with community values.

Step 2.2: Create mechanisms to recognise expertise

So how can you recognise actual expertise versus good marketing/presentation? And who do we regard as experts? Expertise by proxy is a problem – for example, with consultancies. Expertise needs to be complemented with experience. And how do we systemically value experience that is not based on professional expertise, like the experience of having a child and struggling to get benefits, versus the expertise of a business analyst who assesses the user journey from a position of no experience?

In the absence of knowledge on how to recognise expertise, it can become (often unintentionally) measured by the perceived ‘influence’ of a person or organisation. This can lead to actual expertise by less visible people being missed through the relative ease of engaging with “expert influencers”. A person or organisation with many members, followers, testimonies or subscribers is presumed legit, creating a perverse incentive for populist experts rather than deep, experienced or evidence-based expertise. This is particularly hard for official bodies to address when they don’t have, or don’t engage with, internal experts capable of recognising and assuring true expertise.

Expertise can be assessed in a few ways, whether the person is a “labelled” expert or not:

1. Reputation / networks
2. Common history
3. Overlapping skills
4. Observation of outcomes
5. Identification of relevant lived experience

In each space, there are difficulties, short cuts and accountabilities. Depending on the degree of responsibility held by action on a judgment of expertise, some level of risk becomes a salient component.

Reputation is a common basis in public policy, sometimes based on factors quite different to the delivery of good outcomes – and often dependent on the offsetting of responsibility to a reputation. This standpoint emphasises that the judgment of the person or organisation on whose reputation one recommends that reliance is placed is led with one's personal reputation. It is important to remember that both risk and reputation are always, to some degree, shared. So how can one minimise one's risk levels when making decisions or recommendations? Diffusion of responsibility, and obscuring (or at least reducing the transparency) of the decision process, is a standard risk-avoiding mode of operation for individuals but this, of course, creates risk for the institution and for the outcome sought. Reputation can also be tunnel-visioned, as what is considered a good reputation for a particular type of expertise may not be obvious to a generalist. The use of reputation as a primary mechanism to make decisions can create a chain of connections and concerns that might be handled within a formal bureaucracy where internal expertise can interpret and understand what might be relevant to a reputational assessment, otherwise this mechanism can create pressures to reduce transparency and subsequent assessment processes.

Using **common history** allows experience over time on the reliability, delivery and skills of the person or organisation being assessed for their expertise for a task to be based on both observation and personal relationships, as well as enhanced judgment of how the expertise available will be applied. It is hardly surprising that personal links between public service and potential contracting organisations rely on this when possible, and that it can lead to insular feedback loops that don't reflect broad perspectives, experiences or emergent expertise.

Overlapping skills is where the expertise needed happens to coincide with other expertise already available, directly to indirectly, especially if it demands creativity. This is rarely available to the degree that organisations require – especially if networking of individuals in different employment environments is not encouraged to mix and exchange professional perspectives. When public services become centralised this mixing is the first aspect to decay and be reduced in priority to the point where it becomes scarce – and undervalued if available. This brings spatial distribution and governance issues into play, and creates serious problems when issues are regarded

as security or politically sensitive can cause the cutting out of whole layers of society where such skills may reside. Codesign with these varied communities is a term often used but rarely genuinely delivered due to the power relationships that such processes disturb. The informal links that develop within specialties and disciplines by their nature bridge organisations of very different types. The centralisation of public service has caused these to wither and die. We need them back. What mechanisms can be used? One gleam of hope is the Zoom–Teams mode of contact maintenance, but initial physical interactions are needed to make them truly effective.

The last and sometimes most difficult is **observations of outcomes**. Measurement and reporting create failures as well as successes, and so data collection can become sparse and of limited availability, even when the results are uncontroversial. Confidence that the full history is known to applications of expertise is needed, and again the power and risk components can ensure that this swiftly moves – however unnecessarily – into Fol territory, creating fear or avoidance behaviours.

Finally, in any policy or program area, it is crucial to understand and engage any **relevant lived experience**, such as people affected or with experience of the problem space, communities who are meant to benefit, companies who must consume the regulation, even public servants who have prior experience of the topic. Tapping into lived experience is the key to engaging the lessons and learnings from history, and the key to ensuring the point and purpose of the initiative is well grounded and informed by reality.

The rise and critical need for multi-specialists poses an opportunity for recognising and recruitment, but it necessarily requires a mindset that values and prioritises people for the entirety of what they could contribute, not just the narrow definition of a specific role description. It is not enough to have single discipline specialists. We need people with a blend of technical/digital skills, lawyers, design, policy, frontline expertise, lived experience, software developers. Knowledge of more than one discipline creates the skill of understanding different domains and how to speak and translate between disciplines. So at least some recruitment activities need to actively seek and value multi-disciplinary skills and experience.

Step 2.3: Create time, permission and spaces for expertise to grow

A carefully balanced program of work should give people and teams some breathing space, which also means protecting teams from unnecessary busy work. The number of “urgent” requests in any department is sometimes breathtaking, and people often drown in the barrage of emails and end up working longer and longer hours, becoming less and less productive. It is important for individuals, and particularly senior executives, to constantly ensure that most of the time is being spent on doing the actual job and not getting entirely sucked into busy work that doesn’t further the mission. This means trying to streamline, automate and sometimes deprioritise busy work to protect important work. It also means senior management needs to delegate more decision-making to empower teams to get better outcomes, not just delegate effort or tasks and certainly not delegate unnecessary busy work.

This, in turn, creates space for one of the most important parts of maintaining expertise: continuous innovation. One of the key aspects of maintaining high levels of expertise is to spend some time on issues that one feels need exploring but are not necessarily prioritised by management at the time. The basic rule that “basic research, given time, produces the largest payoffs” applies. This is the basis on which continuing education in almost any field maintains a benefit in personal development.

It would be ideal to have as common practice the establishment of 5–10% innovation time for all public servants to learn, explore, experiment, test and think deeply about the domain areas they are working in. While most public servants are under pressure 100% of their day, we will continue to see people operating under a perpetual sense of crisis and urgency, perpetuating reactive and urgent use of potentially ineffective levers without the time and permission to consider or create more effective ones.

Many public servants have untapped expertise and are, in the main, highly motivated, so identifying how best to enable them to contribute to continuous improvement of the public service is critical in any

reform. Opportunity is usually all that is needed. So, it is important to introduce the opportunity for them to contribute in this way.

Innovation always takes time – and frequently quite a lot of time – before it is recognised and a little longer yet before it is effectively utilised as wider perceptions take time to develop and emerge as part of action programs. This is true in every sphere but has been largely forgotten in public service culture.

One might consider blaming the high costs of formal training that have become commonplace, making it considerably harder not only to get support for undertaking anything not seen as being of immediate utility, but to get the time required to do it at all.

Time as a competitive advantage, a useful concept in business, has resonance in this case. The cultural and performance construction within public service has moved from being an asset to becoming a severe constraint.

The expansion of interchange with the many communities outside the public service that has been so severely constrained by locational, time and compressed priorities is a step that will form a basic enhancement of performance. A less than obvious reason is that the wider value systems and frames of reference will allow – and indeed demand – greater recognition and support for ethical behaviour as such interactions on a wider and less instrumental basis. Not only will transparency be underpinned, but public service integrity will be reinforced as these interactions outside instrumental goals play a greater part.

The current constraints make it difficult to avoid fear of being misunderstood, of bringing fresh views forward outside management expectations, and into areas of potential discipline and the fears that inevitably arise, thereby increasing risk avoidance and as a result of the mixed value systems of political goals, the balance will reduce the current solid grounds for fear if public service integrity is expressed as a constraint.

Fear does not enhance performance. In environments that must respond swiftly as well as plan long term, it damages both. Steps to reduce

this natural tendency can correct the balance back to one where the community once again have confidence in the public service, which in turn increases the effectiveness of public servants.

The investment in wider exchanges within and without the public service operational communities also encourages the development of the networks and resources in mutual knowledge of what is possible and what can be done by expanding the base of interactions. This needs time and recognition that interchanges *outside* as well as *inside* the public service are essential.

So much interpenetration of disciplines, tools, perspectives and approaches is occurring throughout society that if greater and more productive – and acceptable – collective working is to develop fully, the underpinning human network infrastructure needs to be given the chance to develop.

Of course, these now endemic driving factors demand a more sophisticated understanding and recognition of what now comprises competence – and a broader range of factors (such as those explored in the previous paragraphs) or they will continue to atrophy.

But to gain the most benefit from skills, perception and acuity, individuals need to consistently have the opportunity to interact with different kinds of people to stimulate thoughts not only in new directions but within their current responsibilities. Recognition of the need for policy people to engage in this is not prioritised, driving short-term and insular thinking that goes largely unchallenged. Multi-disciplinary teams are a small step to broadening horizons and policy possibilities. This can then be dramatically expanded through genuine and exploratory cross-sector and community engagement.

At the simplest level, it is now all too evident that the technical skills in the public service are often absent, distal or inadequate to judge, evaluate, and manage externalised expertise through contracts. This cannot entirely be achieved by hiring more technically skilled people, unless the environment in the public service encourages the enhancement of these skills – and the crucial professional networking that allows environmental sensing to be done.

Increasing the number of skilled technical people will not be enough if expertise is not well leveraged and if they are not supported to succeed. Such people do not respond well to micromanagement by generalists but respond with remarkable productivity to sound and trusted leadership. So, there needs to be leadership models that empower, engage, trust and actively leverage expertise in all its forms.

If the rapid and ever-changing interpenetrations of disciplines and skills demand sensitivity to different cultures (Wigan, 2020) are done in a good leadership environment, productivity and creativity will rise. The problems handled by the public service demand both, and the terms of judgment of leadership (as distinct from ‘management’) need formal and stronger definitions and support.

This leadership stance requires the skills of all parties, not just the highly educated (and often inexperienced), to be valued and utilised. This lesson is often missed in increasingly isolated and siloed cultures across the public service. The cure? Become less isolated! Interchanges can be extremely productive, especially when the different groups – especially senior management – gain incisive expert input directly.

It has to be recognised that many public institution cultures (and views of HR functions) have become possibly inimical to this working to harness a wider range of skills, so addressing any cultural issues is necessary. This might not be well received initially by some functions (such as HR) with the highly regulatory cultures that have emerged today, but it is certainly addressable.

The constructive development and use of HR skills inventories is not valuable solely for HR staff assessing fits for development strategies (or replacements) but as an active tool for identifying the broad ranges of skills people bring with them and develop. Used creatively, this will help secure a much wider range of skills at many different levels when tasks, plans or projects are being addressed or reviewed. The tendency of progress to be seen linearly from an HR stance can no longer be afforded, and a broader basis of skills inventories becomes more and more important.

Step 2.4: Bring broad and deep expertise into the room

In all aspects of public service, actively bringing deep and diverse expertise (including experience) into the room is critical. Whether engaging in policy development, briefing an executive or minister, establishing a grants program, drafting legislation or even building a channel for service delivery, engaging with and involving a broad range of expertise will improve the feasibility, integrity, credibility and the impact and value realisation of whatever you are doing.

For example, AI policy should be informed by both AI expertise and the lived experience and values of people impacted by AI systems. Social policy should be informed by social service expertise and the needs and values of people who use social services. All work in public sectors should be informed by a deep and confident understanding of public sector craft, including the legislative context, authority and obligations under which each public servant operates.

It can feel impossible and risky to collaborate or work openly when you are under enormous pressure or in a highly directive environment. Unfortunately, many public servants live this reality daily. If you want to yield the benefits of collaboration, you must establish a strong team culture that supports and recognises exploration, collaboration and openness. Collaboratively developing a culture statement with your team, branch, division or even department draws out the behaviours people want to see in their work environment and creates a foundation for mutual respect, trust and engagement across your team and with your colleagues. Even within a broader challenging context, it is possible to establish a mutually agreed team culture within three months or so, which then starts to yield significant benefits for the teams and work program. By about six to nine months, you should see behaviours changing and individuals starting to naturally collaborate, share and reach out more. If your culture explicitly supports experimentation, then people can try things (and perhaps fail) before a major commitment, which also enables greater collaboration around small test cases for mutual benefit, with early experimentation effectively derisking initiatives.

Even briefing activities could be improved by bringing actual experts into the room (which used to be commonplace) to help a discussion with senior leaders or ministers to be more grounded and productive, where expertise can help inform, guide and support decision-making in the moment.

Bringing internal expertise into the room can be as simple as working transparently, sharing the forward work plan and leveraging internal communications and intranets, which all act to provide a means for any staff across an organisation with relevant expertise or experience to self-identify and volunteer information.

Bringing external expertise into the room requires a broader range of public servants to be empowered to engage with expert communities and with the public as part of their day-to-day work, where the media/communications capability is used as an enabler of public engagement rather than as a gatekeeper. There will always be a need for highly focused and expert management of media and formal communications, but the common assumption that public engagement is a centralised activity to be managed by the communications team has become an unintended barrier to engaging in public expertise. Organisations need to explicitly change this assumption, and better support public servants to engage as needed, while also valuing the idea that public engagement is as much about relationship building as it is about valuing and leveraging expertise and lived experience in the broader community.

There should be a commitment to deep expertise development, including in the senior executive layers. The practice of moving people around every two to three years has resulted in a system that spends half its time educating new management about a program, only to have to start again soon thereafter. Staff mobility is certainly an important part of a holistic workforce strategy, but moving for the sake of moving is unnecessarily disruptive, and mechanisms that value individual manager career advancement over the importance and efficacy of the mission are problematic.

A model used by the United Kingdom government to engage deep expertise is to bring in a small advisory group of outstanding academics and domain experts for periods of up to three years, often dealing with

only part of a portfolio, such as transport, to explore important policy ideas and publish their findings openly. Canada has an “interchange” program, in which domain expertise or capabilities are brought in to lead and transfer domain knowledge to the public sector.

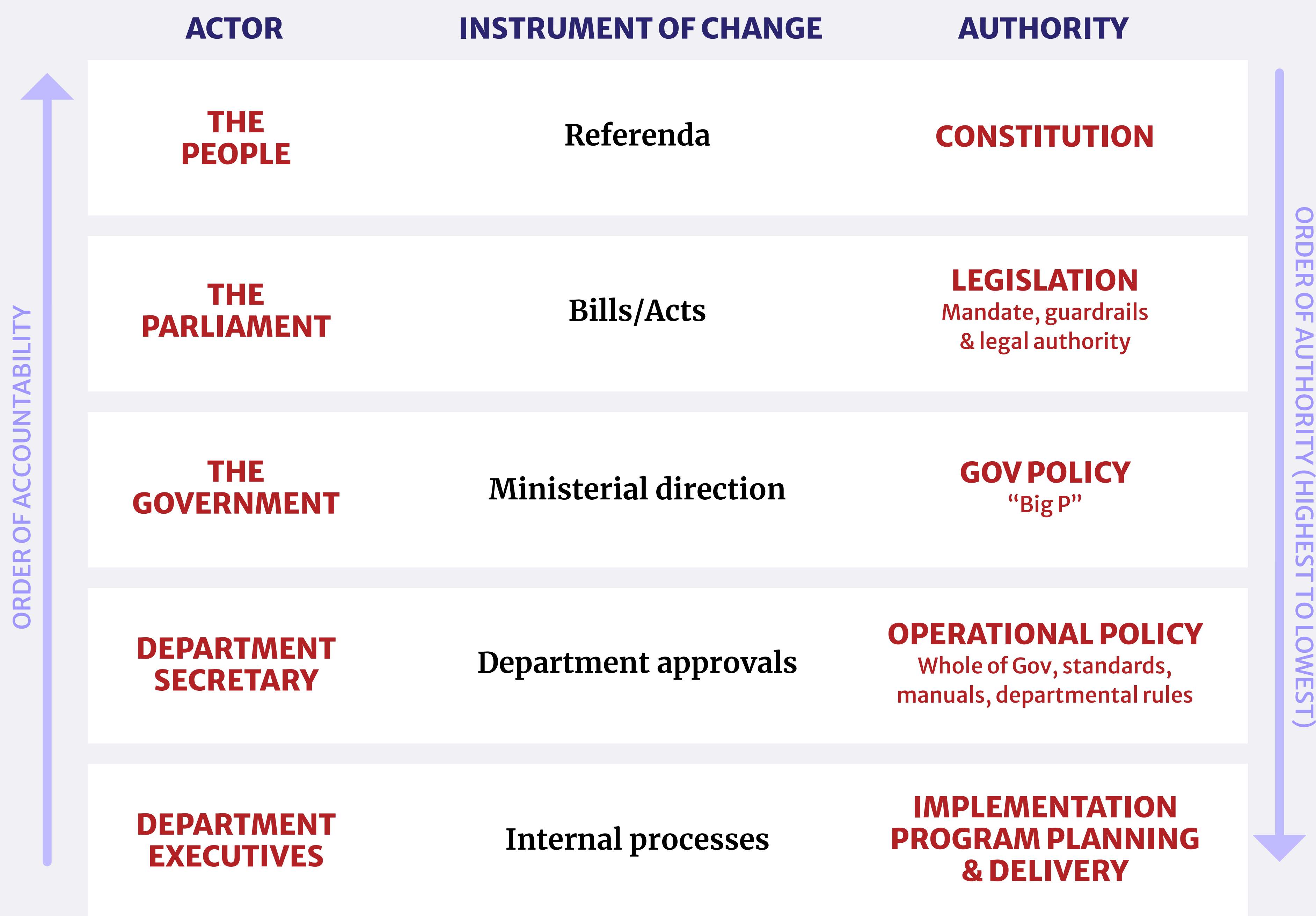
Finally, it’s important to invest in knowledge retention mechanisms, systems and efforts to capture and make readily available the institutional memory of an organisation so that lessons can be learned and applied into the future. Mistakes don’t have to be repeated in the absence of history.

Step 2.5: Policy reform

There needs to be a clearer definition of and practice around different forms of policy. We need to get back to a world where public institutions confidently manage the policy domains they are accountable for, and where they are responsive to but not hostage to government policies (those held by the current administration). Current practices require public servants to not comment “on any policy matters”, which has been interpreted as public servants not even speaking about legislation or operational policies for which the department is responsible. For example, in a recent (2024) Senate inquiry, a central department was asked about procurement practices, for which they answered that they “couldn’t speak on matters of government policy”, which was immediately chastised by the inquiry chair because the Commonwealth procurement rules are not “government policy”. Public servants, particularly senior executives, need to understand this delineation and be able to confidently understand, implement and speak to policies they are responsible for, and only avoid commenting on political policies, which is entirely appropriate.

Below is a framework for understanding different policy authorities, the hierarchy of policy authority, and how each is managed by what change mechanisms. It is critical that public servants understand the limitations and hierarchy of power to preserve the checks and balances that stop any one group going unchecked. It is also critical that public servants understand and leverage their delegated authority, which is quite significant, to deliver on their mandated responsibilities. The framework below should be seen as an enabler for public servants to engage in and exercise their delegations.

HARD POWERS – POLICY AUTHORITIES AND DECISION MAKING



Step 2.6: Senior executive public sector expertise

Senior executives need to be exceptional managers who care for their staff and fulfil their fiscal and corporate obligations. But senior executives should also be the most exemplary of public servants, demonstrating public sector craft and measurably delivering effective public impact and outcomes.

Senior executives in the public sector have an enormous amount of authority and make significant decisions every day. Therefore, all senior executives, including specialist roles, should have or should be required to develop a deep understanding of the public sector, including the legal, legislative and constitutional context in which their work. This necessarily means a working understanding of administrative

law, rule of law, the legislation their department administers (and their obligations and delegated authorities thereof), procurement requirements and various workforce obligations and rights of staff. It also means understanding who they serve (the government, the Parliament and the people), and the “success conditions” of the public sector, including the policy and public outcomes they are meant to be delivering. This expertise can be broadly referred to as “public sector craft” and should be a requirement for senior executives to either have or quickly develop, and to refresh regularly.

Part of this expertise needs to be the ability to manage and maintain proportionality in all things. Proportional program planning and resourcing always maintains a balance between short-term urgency and long-term importance. Proportional workforce design to ensure diversity, inclusiveness, broad expertise and continuous development of staff and culture. A proportional to serving the government, the Parliament and the people, so that all three are considered and served, and none are neglected. Finally, this means also having the skills and confidence to establish and protect a little capacity for staff to regularly innovate and explore as part of their general work, to unlock and apply their expertise and experience in the continuous improvement and optimisation of policies and program delivery.

This extends to changing executive hiring practices and processes to prioritise public sector craft, either in the hiring process or as part of robust onboarding and ongoing executive training and development. It is also important to recognise and value outcomes delivery, and the ability to demonstrate measurable impact in senior hiring, to prioritise individuals who are effective at driving their mission, not just able to administer their corporate and workforce responsibilities.

The definition of “leadership” also needs to become more about leading by example, delivering great outcomes to the public (not outputs), supporting staff to thrive and demonstrating stewardship of public institutions. Many programs in public sectors currently teach top-down leadership methods and models to senior executives. This reinforces the flawed notion that seniority correlates somehow to superiority, which in turn drives senior executive behaviours that disempower and dismiss the experience, expertise and value of people the further down the hierarchy they are.

An alternative is to consider “servant leadership” as the new norm in the public sector. Servant leadership is about serving, protecting and supporting the people who work for you to bring their best and whole selves to work. It is about acknowledging that excellence comes from everyone, not just from the top. Servant leadership invites everyone to participate and co-create on the journey rather than just dragging staff along, turning change into something that can be collaborative and opportunistic, rather than dreaded.

It would be additionally beneficial to return secretaries to a tenured post approach, as this would improve the confidence of secretaries to act without fear nor favour of the politics of the day and proactively use their delegated authority to deliver on their department mission, and equally serve the government, the Parliament and the people.

Step 2.7: Digital expertise for a digital world

The world today is a digital one. All policies, regulations and programs are inevitably delivered with and supported by technologies, data, analytics, online services and other digital tools. Public institutions today need to be digitally literate and confident with technology and modern methodologies to be successful in delivering a modern public administration.

With the world now a quarter of the way through the 21st century, public servants at all levels should acquire and retain a high level of internet and digital expertise. This is not just to use new technologies or digitise existing processes, but to adopt a digital, hyper-connected, sensing and continuously innovative mindset to keep pace with the speed and scale of the modern world, and be willing and able to adapt to continuous change, including the evolving and emergent needs of the people and communities served by our public institutions.

It is worth briefly mentioning that the public sector doesn’t exist in a vacuum. No matter how tempting it can be to frame the public sector as separate from society or the economy, it remains true (certainly in Australia) that the actions and behaviours of public servants and institutions have the largest impact of any actor in our economy.

Government is the biggest employer and the biggest spender, and the activities of the public sector affect us all, from individuals to communities and entire markets. When the public sector invests in itself, entire sectors are changed, born and sustained. So, if Australia wants to be a leading digital economy, then we need public institutions to be digital exemplars. This necessarily includes digital public infrastructure such as digital identity platforms, digital legislation (rules as code), machine-readable content and machine-to-machine government systems and services. In short, public institutions need to provide government as a platform.

The digitalisation of organisations and communications to date provides both a basis for continuous improvement, but also a challenge for change, as many systems and funding mechanisms presume a set and forget approach, which is anathema to a rapidly changing world.

In contrast to pure digitalisation where processes and systems are simply transferred from a paper form to software form, true “digital transformation” is where an organisation actively considers how they might achieve their intended purpose and policy objectives in a digital world, leveraging new methods, mindsets and technologies, while embracing continuous change and complexity, with all the opportunities (and challenges) of a hyper-networked community and world. As such, public institutions need to be continuously seeking to explore, understand and respond to emerging opportunities and threats (including emerging technologies). This necessarily includes systemic and structural support for flexibility in how institutions operate, because continuous optimisation and responsiveness to change is impossible in the current funding paradigm where every dollar, resource and business requirement is expected to be set in stone prior to even starting a project. Public institutions need to instead develop operating models and budgeting approaches that prioritise outcomes, impact and support continuous optimisation over time, rather than limping from project funding bid to project funding bid. Digital and agile methods for budgeting can provide flexibility and help to support greater systemic agility, while also enabling new technologies and methods to be adopted over time, with the genuine impact and outcomes measures used as a “north star” to ensure and assure policy and program efficacy.

Step 3: Put the ‘public’ back into public sector

There are always challenges in engaging the public in the public service. However, there are arguably greater challenges when a lack of engagement leads to programs, policies or practices that are unworkable or ineffective due to being uninformed by diverse expertise, experience or public needs. Emergent issues for public engagement include gaming by organisations, individuals, bots or indeed foreign actors, though harnessing a broader basis for contestability is easier than has historically been available. This makes judgment of expertise harder than ever before, and the issue of authorship of the materials on which such judgment has to be based from a distance will become exponentially harder very quickly. The mixing within discipline groups across different types of organisations – which enables networking – is an important way to counteract these challenges, but there is no doubt that we need to systemically reintroduce the “public” into public service.

Step 3.1: Genuine engagement with the community

Public institutions can establish and implement participatory practices and governance for the design, delivery and management of public institutions, public policies and public services, that take into account and plans for modern and emerging technologies, increasing change of community needs and the environment in which we live, as well as the genuine benefits and improved outcomes from when public servants partner with people and communities in shaping policies and services.

Public engagement should not be considered an exercise to manage through the communications team. Many public servants should have the skills to engage with the public as part of their normal daily responsibilities, and public institutions should create persistent programs for public engagement so as to build trust, confidence and a genuine relationship with the community, rather than a series of disconnected, ad hoc engagements that feel like groundhog day to communities who are entirely sick of repeating themselves only to be asked the same questions again and again.

Not all work in the public service is appropriate for public engagement. But the critical step here is to only have a “need to know” approach in the sensitive or secret domains that require it and shift the rest of public service to an “open by default” approach, where transparency and engagement are considered critical and normal, rather than nice to have.

Whether exploring policy options, developing a new program, building public-facing services or creating new public infrastructure, transparency and operational communications can be shared openly, and community engagement can be continuous. In fact, the more you share, the more trust you build, and naturally motivated partners you will attract. Building transparency and engagement (including trials, codesign and feedback loops) into your program will greatly help it to succeed and will provide an important pipeline of information to your team, enabling you to keep a finger on the pulse and be more adaptive to change as it occurs.

Below are some practical ideas for improving public participation in policy, services and governance:

- **engaging the public to determine** what they would need to see from the relevant public institution and from the public sector more broadly to consider electoral outcomes, policies, programs and services as legitimate and trustworthy
- **engage the broad diversity of interests** across the community (socio-economic, demographic, a full range of ages, vulnerabilities, and Indigenous) to co-design, test, gather ongoing feedback and continuously improve the quality of public services, and veracity of policies and regulation
- **all registered political parties should be prohibited from using deepfake technologies**, either for real or in jest, to avoid the normalisation of deep fakes in democratic processes and avoid the degradation of public trust and confidence in elections

- **strengthen political neutrality and independence of the broader public sector**, including reform on how communications offices in departments work to enable a more independent public sector voice and presence in the public domain
- exploring **how to ensure, assure and oversee that Administrative Law is both accessible and upheld** in an increasingly digitally enabled, data-driven and automated public sector, including means to ensure all actions and decisions are fully and easily appealable and auditable, as well as being in accordance with law, reasonable and fair
- designing and building the kind of **digital public infrastructure** that helps ensure and provide trustworthy, accountable, appealable and traceable governance moving forward
- strengthening public institutions' operations, budgetary processes, reporting and incentive systems to **primarily be driven by a public good imperative**, measured through quality-of-life metrics and the wellness framework, rather than purely economic or 'efficiency' measures. For example, helping support people to get the services and support they are entitled to rather than trying to minimise entitlement to save budget. Ideally, all public policies, programs and services should be linked to the wellness framework, including intended and real impact on individuals, whānau and communities
- establishing **participatory governance more broadly for the development and administration of policies**, programs and service delivery in Australia
- **establish or support a misinformation watch site for Australia** and encourage the public to find and report misinformation, deepfakes, radicalisation or other threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience

Creating opportunities for public participation has undeniable power to help find and assure expertise, and deliver knowledge not held in official bodies. Public and open engagement with expertise doesn't just create mechanisms for people with relevant expertise and experience

to volunteer contributions, but if the contributions themselves are publicly visible, a means to peer review that content. The overall effect of broadening the base of engagement in many policy areas would improve not just the quality and breadth of expertise leveraged but would improve the credibility of policy bodies perceived as responsive to and inclusive of a wider scope for expertise, experience and policy critiques.

When expertise isn't well recognised then it can't be utilised well. Similarly, if staff are not provided time and space to develop and apply expertise in novel ways, then the workforce eventually loses the ability to adapt, innovate or be proactive, creating stagnation that cannot keep pace with the extrinsic and increasing rate of change in needs, opportunities or risk.

The greatest but often misunderstood barrier to public participation is the simple issue of public capacity. Most people are too busy at work and at home to have the capacity to contribute to public consultations. So mechanisms need to be created to create public capacity: policy juries, where a demographically representative group of individuals are paid for their time to contribute to helping shape a particularly contentious or complicated policy; "civic gap years", where public institutions might offer one year paid positions for citizens to contribute to policies or programs; or low-effort consultations, like SMS or social media engagement on policy consultations (rather than only the traditional discussion paper consultations). Public servants can also participate in community spaces or events to engage with public expertise and experience. Finally, it is critical that policy engagement activities are easy to find. Public visibility, including to relevant organisations and community groups, enables discovery, and people can only participate in what they know about in a heavily time-poor society.

Below is a brief guide on different forms of public participation, where the higher the tier, the higher the value to both the public and to the public service:

Level 1: request for comment. This is the most common form of public engagement today. Departments release discussion papers for comment or feedback, which is substantial work for public servants to shape

a paper that is published for feedback, and then the community are effectively invited to just tweak what has been created. Engagement varies, with some consultations just publishing online, and some going all out to proactively engage with stakeholders and community groups.

Pros: relatively low touch engagement, tends to focus feedback in a pre-defined direction.

Cons: normative outcomes, tends to focus feedback in a pre-defined direction, high amount of preparation effort and high amount of response effort creating limitations on diversity or views submitted.

Level 2: user-centred design. Any form of early engagement with ‘end users’ of a strategy, policy, program, service or piece of regulation is helpful as a form of participatory design. It is a useful form of taking a more human-centred approach to public sector processes, and it is already commonplace in service design, so is relatively easy to extend to other areas of government, including policy development. When you engage with the end users of your work, be it a service or policy, you have a better chance of meeting their actual needs. If you don’t engage with end users, understand them and test different approaches with them, then you are simply imagining or hoping people will use/interact with your work in the way you intend. For service delivery, User-Centred Design (UCD) has become mainstream in many public sectors, resulting in better-designed and more intuitive service delivery. Sometimes UCD also includes observing user behaviours. In the policy profession, there has been some early adoption of UCD and agile methods for policy (eg, [NSW Policy Lab](#)) to develop policy artefacts that are easier for policy consumers to understand and implement. In legislation and regulation design, we’ve seen bringing end users into the room result in profoundly better rules and outcomes ([Better Rules work, NZ](#)).

Pros: work gets shaped around actual user needs and the testing approach assures a better-quality output with more predictable implementation. There are well understood methods with many skilled professionals available. Usually, participation is equitable because diversity is necessarily sought and compensated for inclusive design.

Cons: even though the work output is better shaped, you still get a somewhat normative outcome because the broad direction is largely set in that you are engaging people only as end users which assumes the product is necessary. There is a subtle power imbalance to be careful of as it can too easily focus feedback in a pre-defined direction, eg, “which design is better” as opposed to “is this the right thing to be doing at all”?

Level 3: Participatory development/drafting. This is where something is still in an early formative phase, and you engage publicly or externally in helping shape it from the start, which is quite different to user-centred practices, where you engage with end users primarily to just understand and test their needs. Participatory drafting can draw out some profound ideas, assumptions and experience very early, to help shape something from the start. It requires strong support for getting the right outcome and an appetite for having flexibility in the direction of the thing. This approach creates a little more work up front and can lead to a substantially different direction than first anticipated, but gets something that is likely faster to implement, with greater public support, and results that are more durable and sustainable. Good examples of participatory drafting include the Taiwanese approach taken to co-draft Uber legislation in Taiwan (Centre for Public Impact, 2015), the New Zealand Police wiki for participatory legislation (Stuff, 2009), the Australian Public Spheres done by Senator Kate Lundy to co-draft policy recommendations (Andrews, 2009) which included public contributions to the Gov 2.0 Taskforce Report (Gruen et al, 2009) and Citizen Assemblies or Policy Juries in Canada (Einsiedel et al, 2001) which were also used in New Zealand for a time. Other examples of participatory drafting could include public proposal systems, which aren't just about feedback but enable completely new ideas, like public ideation or participatory budgeting projects. Ideation work and participatory drafting work have been done in Australia for years with local examples including work by engage2, Democracy 2025, Bang the Table and many more community or company-led participatory programs. These methods were proven and useful and need to become normal public sector processes. Participatory budgeting examples include Porte Alegre, Brazil since 1989 (local government), NSW's My Community Dividend and Iceland's Better Reykjavik. Service examples

are trickier because even internally, the scope of a service is often defined by policy, legislation or strategy, so it is in these early phases where participatory drafting is most powerful. Although a lot of public servants seek external feedback for their work (policy, legislation, services, etc) through subject matter experts, industry engagement, stakeholder engagement or consultants, the value of public participation in drafting or designing is that you get a perspective from the people who will be affected by the work, not just those with a subject matter expertise, business or contractual imperative.

Pros: much more formative method for overall direction, gains greater public trust and support through their participation, better quality outcomes informed by public values as well as a broad range of experience and expertise.

Cons: unless the coordinators make an explicit effort to enable equitable and diverse participation, this method can too easily create an over-representation of privileged groups who have time and skills, and who aren't intimidated by government and can easily be neutralised by NDAs as a cognition for consultation participation. Extra effort needs to be made to ensure representative and inclusive participation.

Level 3: system co-design or 'walking together' through to co-delivery.

All the methods above involved people at different levels of influence in the work, with increasing levels of flexibility in direction. Genuine co-design is rare as it necessarily involves bringing two or more parties together on an equal footing to determine shared goals, methods and values, and actually design and decide the way forward together. This means being very flexible on all aspects of the work, including perhaps the idea that the core premise isn't correct at all. It is the most disruptive to a centralised or top-down way of working, but does yield the best results, especially for wicked problems. It is also the best at avoiding potential or even accidental exclusive (single purpose or homogenous) design by the people responsive to the policy or services. This approach is rare in the public sector for many reasons but could be used more to provide better outcomes for systemic challenges or opportunities. A few good examples include the 'Walk Together' design methodology (Goddard, 2019) which is a culturally responsive design

approach, the participatory action research work done for the ‘Both Ways’ report (Fasoli, 2004), and great work done by “Old Ways, New” (Abdilla, 2020) in bringing design, culture and technology together. When initiatives are then co-delivered, you get a profound impact through systemically motivated partners collaboratively delivering around shared or common goals. Another example of co-design and co-delivery is the work done in southeast Queensland during the 2005 floods where government co-designed and co-delivered a work program to respond to the crisis. Indeed, a lot of great co-design and co-delivery seems to happen when there is a crisis, the question is how we can bring it into business as usual.

Pros: is the best path for working through complexity or ‘wicked problems’ and for getting to design sustainable solutions that don’t just include people in the process but enables them to genuinely shape it in accordance with their values.

Cons: requires the most commitment, flexibility and support. Requires time, skills, relationship building and longer-term deadlines to get to a point of genuine consensus through engagement and co-design, noting this isn’t a con, but makes it harder unless teams in government are supported to take time to do this kind of work properly.

Level 4: shared oversight or co-governance. All the methods above get you to a point in time, but the highest level of participatory public governance is where you have public transparency, oversight and participation in the ongoing governance of your work. Sometimes this is ostensibly achieved through independent advisory or steering groups, but to operate properly these groups should have their minutes and decisions publicly available to avoid creating unaccountable or self-serving governance. The SmartStart public service in NZ has independent groups on the project governance (in this case, via a steering group) providing a balancing force that tips in the favour of the citizens’ needs amidst the ongoing tensions of budget constraints and competitive projects in public sectors. If we had citizens or citizen groups involved in policy governance, we believe that we would see greater public outcomes. This, of course, requires ways to support equitable and inclusive representation on such governance groups,

which then requires either persistent funded roles or some other funding mechanism. Given so many things in government are funded as projects with start and end dates, it would take some significant work to make this normal in many public sectors, but we suggest that it is worth the effort as it sets programs up with oversight and pressures that are well balanced and aligned towards best public outcomes.

Pros: creates a live feedback loop with communities to support ongoing review, improvement and optimisation of the policy or program.

Cons: is challenging to manage competing priorities and diverse expectations and challenging to stick to necessary constraints of legal and policy authority.

Below are a few useful enablers for participatory policy, and all public servants are urged to look at how to engage the communities they serve in the work they do, and how they can build trust and persistent relationships along the way.

- **Internal demand:** it needs to be usual practice to engage people and communities, and not just ‘stakeholders’ in public policy design. This means a top-down commitment and genuine valuing of public contributions in the process
- **Internal capacity/capability:** internal capability is critical to enabling meaningful participatory approaches to the work of our public sectors. It is worth noting that although capability development is critical, if you don’t have a genuine demand for public participation, then capability will wither over time. If you have genuine and persistent demand, then capability development will pay dividends in driving better public sectors and better public outcomes. Internal capacity isn’t just the skills required, but also the building of persistent data and evidence bases that can inform work, strategic directions and programs on an ongoing basis, with the benefit of hindsight and institutional memory kept intact

- **Citizen capacity:** the biggest challenge to participatory public governance is that most people are full-time at work and then full-time at home, dropping kids off early and picking them up late to then be rushing around all hours of the day. We need ways to free up and fund people's time
- **Systemic motivation for better human outcomes:** despite the personal values of many public servants, the core drivers of action in Australian public sectors have become time, budgets or top-down directives. Not only does this create a systemic disincentive to engage the public in genuine codesign, but until we have systemic and holistic drivers that value human outcomes, we will continue to see primarily politically and financially incentivised policies, services and general activities of our public sectors. To improve things we could adopt explicitly human outcomes success measures like the [Living Standards Framework in NZ](#), or the [NSW government's Human Services Outcomes Framework](#)
- **Political neutrality:** if public service is overly politically directed, then it can't or won't be incentivised to engage the public in policy. When public policy is informed from a genuinely apolitical professional perspective, you get more evidence-based policies. So some political independence is crucial to genuine participatory public governance

Finally, a critical aspect is the total disengagement of older and less technically comfortable people (not the same groups), which leads them to avoid even contacting areas they need to and handing it off to somebody else or simply neglecting what they really need to do. Rejection of smartphones is just one symptom, and interminable waits on enforced calls to bodies such as Centrelink – and indeed banks – echo around and lead to learned helplessness. The steady accretion of the largest pool of unused expertise, judgment and experience in the deemed to be 'retired' age groups simply cannot be ignored as the demographics work steadily against reliance on young generations. As is often ignored, the older age groups are both unused reservoirs of badly needed and fully tempered experience and also a rising percentage of the voting population in the current and next

generations, as demography is making painfully clear. Let us use it. And how best? Make them part of the system for a year. This will require a very different governance structure to make best use of these new and rather different (and hopefully less conditioned) resources. This too will be an opportunity to enhance internal expertise and communicate with the wider community as the flow increases.

Step 3.2: Collaborate for impact with naturally motivated partnerships

One of the main pressures on public sectors is around budget and resource constraints. Everyone increasingly has less to do more. In some cases, some of those pressures are conflated by fatigued systems and staff that haven't had investment for decades, with a mountain of technical and cultural debt that grows every day. Collaboration can help ensure better outcomes through working together, cross sector, cross jurisdiction, with communities and with strategic partners around common goals. When we talk to and work with others doing similar work, we can all build upon the efforts of each for better outcomes.

Arguably it's not the job of a citizen to understand the complexities of government, but rather the job of government to do the hard work to abstract the complexities of governance for better engagement and services for citizens. That's our job, which means if you're not collaborating and working across governments in whatever you are doing, then you're not likely getting the best possible outcomes for citizens in the most efficient way.

But there are many challenges to collaboration. One of the biggest challenges is the isolating nature of operational silos created by vertical accountabilities and competition for budget. This creates territorial, adversarial protectionist behaviours, like unwillingness to share even the most basic artefacts, content or tools. Many people, particularly managers, feel pressure to delivery to the specific goals of their chain of command within a tightly constrained budget which makes it much harder to take the risk of co-investment or co-resourcing an outcome. Many believe they can't justify engaging or operational collaboration with others, because success and risk are largely measured in project delivery terms rather than impact or outcomes.

Some strategies to consider when trying to improve collaboration in the public sector including team culture development, tapping into natural motivation, using or developing horizontal work programs (like life journey mapping), and reframing how we see leadership.

The concept of finding the ‘natural motivation’ of players involved is a key component for any type of systemic change to be successful. Traditional policy levers assume that a change can only come about through incentives or disincentives, but neither of these relatively simplistic levers tend to create sustained change, because they perversely rely upon themselves to continue for the change to persist. A self-licking ice cream that ignores the fact that if people aren’t naturally motivated to make the behaviour change themselves, then the change will be both unsustainable and minimally implemented.

Natural motivation is about identifying who is naturally motivated to bring about the change, and empowering and enabling them to fulfil that natural motivation. Obviously there will always be policy changes that require traditional levers, but it is surprising how often natural motivation is overlooked, which misses the opportunity to tap into a lot of latent resourcing and effort that could very well be aligned to create a sustained change.

Public servants can map the relevant actors (primary, beneficiary, independent, influencer, accountability and support, as laid out in part 2) for any policy, program and for their department as a whole to ensure their engagement model matches to the different types of natural motivation, and to maintain a sustainable and genuine approach to public engagement, partnerships, vendor/support engagement and oversight mechanisms.

For example, most people want to be safe online, so rather than punishing or rewarding certain behaviours, just make it easier for them to choose safer methods or behaviours. Most people want to pay their tax on time, to make the tax submission process easy for those people to do the right thing. Natural motivation is simply making the desirable path also the easiest path, creating a natural flow towards a better end state.

Of course, the non-profit sector is also an important part of the puzzle that is often overlooked. Many vulnerable people will go to a trusted non-profit well before they choose to deal with government, because we are both the social worker and the cop. So it is critical that we engage with, support and proactively enable non-profits to do their very best work for the people who most need it. Our role in government isn't just to do, but to support.

Natural motivation involves understanding how what you are trying to do could benefit the very people who need to change and helping them want to do something new of their own volition. Why does this matter? If anyone was asked to spend an extra couple of hours a week at work, for no extra pay, doing something they don't understand that seems completely unrelated to their job or life, they'd rightly resist. And yet policy makers often expect people (and their behaviours) to simply comply if the rules or conditions are changed. Conversely, if someone talked to that same person about how a new way of doing something would save them time, get a better outcome, save money or just made their life better in any way, they'd be more interested.

Natural motivation doesn't need to always come from within the individual person or organisation. Sometimes it can come from a little inspiration, some healthy competition or indeed from a shared goal or emergency

Life journey programs to support cross-sector collaboration

Life journey mapping is a novel but powerful way to create naturally motivated collaboration across departments. New Zealand has led the way with life journey-based service integration, and it is distinct from "customer journey mapping" in that it intentionally maps the full experience of people through a significant life journey, looking at all the user needs and services across all sectors. Often people start with family and friends when having to go through a significant life event, such as end of life, becoming an adult or starting a family. Life journey programs provide opportunities for reducing (through integration) the steps of major life journeys, improve outcomes and dignity for citizens, and to create greater integration and improvements for agencies and society as a whole.

How does it enable collaboration? By providing one of very few horizontal levers in government that can help overcome the vertically aligned portfolio siloes. Usually a service delivery team would do the customer journey mapping of their particular transaction, or perhaps the user experience of their department, but even if they want to improve the whole user experience they have low support to go outside the portfolio mandate to improve the experience with other departments or jurisdictions. And yet, for major life journeys, it is inevitable that citizens have to deal with multiple departments and jurisdictions. When you establish a life journey program, agencies can participate in the process of understanding the holistic journey of people and can see ways to improve the journey up or down stream from their part of the journey. Life journey programs naturally motivate agencies to collaborate sideways as everyone benefits from improving the entire user experience rather than just tweaking individual steps along the way. Many citizens rate their government experience only as good as their last or worst exchange, so raising the quality of the entire experience is critical. Often the integration or service reform opportunities can also create some business benefits for agencies themselves, which then creates further natural motivation to collaborate on life journeys.

This has worked well in New Zealand and the NSW government where life journey programs effectively brought agencies to work together, though this does require senior buy in and putting key life journey agencies in the driving seat of the agenda so they bring their gravitas and networks to the table. It's also important to note that if you don't ensure rapid delivery and value realisation, then enthusiasm and investment from agencies quickly wanes.

Generally, outcomes based and other horizontal programs and pressures that cross portfolio lines are important and helpful counterbalances to the vertical pressures of departments and portfolios, and can profoundly enable collaboration.

Creating trustworthy academic and knowledge enterprises

Father John Culkin once famously said, “We shape our tools and then the tools shape us.” This is very much the case in how online communications and social media platforms have been used for public engagement by public institutions. Online public engagement can be an extremely powerful and effective means to access broad and diverse expertise and experience, however the limiting and shaping of access to groups and posts by social media platforms have increasingly created challenges for how social media can be effectively used for public engagement or discourse. The changes to Twitter by Elon Musk since his takeover illustrate not only how this can be done but also illustrates the user reaction of abandoning the platform.

Universities have their own informal communication channels as well as formal. But the trust level decay in the example of universities is the most alarming, as they are the holders of many very capable people. The use of external consultants on tasks that deeply affect staff when the skills are ones that the university staff are already globally respected for is a clear indication that the internal skills are not valued or respected. Is it ignorance of or a shortfall in the capacity to assess a wider range of skills than the senior staff are fully aware of? A mechanism for imposition rather than cooperative development? Or simply a strong indicator of lack of trust? The results are predictable, with strikes of staff up to and including professors now occurring in the UK.

While the underpayment of staff, the overuse and exploitation of “casual” staff over many years is now driving the wider credibility of the ethics of universities as enterprises down. If the staff cannot trust the universities to behave ethically or legally, there is a huge, accumulated credibility and external social trust bank that is being steadily exhausted. The universities have been used as an illustration of a wider destruction of expertise, trust and the degrading of even their own management of their own expertise in conjunction with the delivery of this very expertise.

This raises the challenging issue of engaging consultants for core government work. The ATO and PWC case is helpful to analyse in this regard (ABC News, 2023). It is necessary to distinguish between several

factors here. The lack of effective monitoring by the government clients demonstrated their own lack of expertise both in the contract monitoring role, in actively managing obvious conflicts of interest in their supplier, and of course in the substance for which PWC was being hired to deliver.

The fact that in most cases the contracted-out work would (and should) arguably have been done internally by an expert public service, albeit with greater engagement with broad and independent expertise in the community, is one thing, but it is also important to note that retaining internal staff under a clear role of service to both the community and the government would have been far cheaper.

This discussion raises the question as to what comprises or should comprise a trustworthy body. This is not trivial, and the pressures and performance judgments applied to different bodies have become fluid – and perhaps more fluid than is prudent. CSIRO has been under commercial pressure under the last head, and before that had mixed performance goals that reduced its utility and interest in smaller industry bodies. Nevertheless, the social licence for CSIRO has remained solid to date. The public service has suffered from mixed goals and so has lost much of the social licence afforded by taking visible actions on the accountability to the community as well as to whatever government is in place. This has been a real cost; one that requires reinvestment to reestablish.

There are three other bodies that we need to review:

1. Universities
2. Independent think tanks
3. Technical and further education

All share substantial issues with their funding and the degree of independent expression expected (if not always permitted) of most staff. We will take these in reverse order, as the complexity rises sharply at each step. The University Accord (2024) was intended to address this complex three-layered system.

TAFE has not normally been considered as a body that had social licence or expectations of public independence, the fundamental requirement for trust. This is going to have to change as there is a huge demand for the skills that are developed in TAFE are now on the critical path to redevelop competitiveness for the Australian economy. This issue has been blurred by the strategies emerging from universities such as RMIT where the plans have led swiftly to that rarest of academic actions in 2023: strikes. The question remains should these two sectors of education be merged or separated? And expected to behave in quite different ways? And accountabilities in forms that the public can trust? Having raised the issue, universities and TAFEs must be discussed as a single spectrum and will be done shortly. This has been done as the second phase of the Universities Accord [report](#) as government policy now requires a higher degree of integration of post-secondary education to meet national goals.

The other segment of potentially trustable bodies are the independent think tanks, even though expertise is needed to differentiate between quality or self-serving advice. The use of independent think tanks has classically been highly valued, and as Oreskites and Conway (2010) have demonstrated so well how both the tobacco and the fossil fuel lobbies have made highly effective use of them to slow down or neutralise policies threatening the interests of the relevant bodies. As Orestes and others have pointed out, even the self same bodies have been pressed into service for climate and fossil fuel delays as were used for holding back tobacco legislation. In both cases this strategy was to exploit the trustability of a deemed independent scientific based body to these ends. This simultaneously demonstrates that trustability was the aspect being sought to be used (or abused), and that the shine has worn off this technique.

As there are still small groups doing high quality work with limited preset agendas, the independent (or “independent”) think tanks must be included in the discussion.

The really difficult one is the university sector. First the basics. The funding has long since stopped being 90% from government under clear bases of adding to knowledge and educating people. Currently the government funding base is closer to 30%, and the overall funding has

dropped from around 0.6% GPD to half this (consider the competitive countries where 3–4% has become the expectation). The shortfall has been built on a rickety foundation of overseas student funding matched by systematic reductions in support of the academics both for the teaching task and their role in knowledge creation. Yet research reputation has been pivotal to attract the overseas students (university rankings) and at the same time been made harder and harder for the academics to create. This financial imbalance has led inevitably to a steady conversion of the management to a corporate style, and set of emergent values generally antipathetic to the many exceptional minds still in their employ, and to confusions in exactly what the KPIs are between the highly paid top management and the values and indeed even the capacities of the top quality academic staff, especially as the versions of ‘productivity’ expected on them become more and more of a confused overlap mixing the academic and commercial goals.

The breakout of strike actions, early retirements, and resource starvation and the emergence of business style ethics in underpayments of staff, redefinitions of many, and a series of publicly clearly unprincipled actions has already begun to severely undermine the public trust basis for universities, and their social licence is clearly under threat.

Scenario planning with organisations that are naturally implicated or participatory in a scenario is another mechanism to support meaningful collaboration and offers substantial improvements in understanding of both the possibilities – and the constraints of proposals. The HATS simulations of Jones et al (1979) allowed this to be explored with the full understanding of all parties. These initiatives are now 40 years old, yet we still see public discussions of almost solely the travel modes rather than activities enabled as the dominant theme. The capability to build full digital twins of cities, full live simulations of environments (PEARL: <https://nla.london/projects/ucl-pearl>), complete intelligent mapping of walkways (footpath.ai) and many activity based modern transport models strongly suggest that a higher level of integrated explorations of policies has been possible for some time now–yet an objective of a coherent digital environment for many areas of policy is still not set. The participation of wider groups in these systems of

simulation – and the now very recent sharp falls in the costs–help to engage people, are substantially more useful than focus groups (which are often too guided to provide broad insights or planning).

Step 3.3: Don't just ask for trust, be trustworthy

Trust in government is key in the perceived legitimacy of all that the public sector administers, from services to policies and elections. That's why earning and maintaining public trust in government systems is not a 'nice to have' but rather is critical for stability and public confidence. Governments must have the trust of the public to remain legitimate.

Trust can be broadly defined as a) a willingness to believe that a person or entity is operating in **good faith**, b) with integrity, and c) in a way that fulfils the individual's expectations of that person or entity. Government systems could therefore be considered trustworthy through demonstrating good faith (through systemic, measurable and publicly reported commitment to human-centred and humane outcomes), by assuring **high integrity** systems (that are lawful, accurate, consistently applied and appealable), and that meets **public expectations** (by understanding and reflecting public values and needs, doing no harm, being transparent and operating within relevant legal, social, moral and jurisdictional limitations of power).

Unfortunately, the way in which governments have digitised or automated manual processes across the breadth of public service functions has often resulted in opaque, inscrutable systems, leading to outcomes that are not explainable or traceable back to their legal authority. For instance, many systems produce outputs without recording the correlating legislative rules, data and other factors the output was based upon, requiring manual review in the case of a challenge. This has made it difficult to understand or appeal decisions made by systems, which are in turn not auditable in real time, and therefore incapable of detecting and minimising unintentional consequences. Most public sector systems also don't measure the human benefits or quality of life impacts (beyond basic satisfaction measures), which makes understanding or driving human outcomes impossible, let alone identifying and mitigating potential harms as they arise.

There are many issues created by opaque and inscrutable systems. Citizens and residents are increasingly faced with a ‘computer says no’ situation from public services, and few or no options to seek an explanation or appeal. Front line staff have limited means of determining, let alone explaining, the rationale behind decisions generated from opaque software systems. The systems, in turn, are often protected from scrutiny by commercial-in-confidence or proprietary vendor arrangements. An increasing number of systems using Artificial Intelligence and/or Automated Decision Making are machine-learning based, using historical data to train predictive responses that perpetuate historical bias/inequities and legacy or system-based mistakes, and create additional uncertainty for the population because they implement.

These issues are anathema to good government. Governments have special context that needs to be considered in the design and delivery of government systems — that is, they are driven by public good, rather than profit, like the private sector. Further, they have greater power and, hence, greater responsibility. This context differentiates government from private sector organisations and requires a different approach to the design and delivery of systems that ensure and assure public outcomes and are fair, accurate and lawful, to maintain public trust, access to justice, and, by extension, legitimate government.

Unlike the private sector, government organisations are expected to be compliant with Administrative Law, with testable and auditable accountability to the Parliament, people and Auditors General. Individual public institutions also each have their own legislative and regulatory responsibilities, delegated authorities and legal constraints, which helps to ensure that programs with a national impact are distinctly governed according to that subject matter. This supports the different goals and controls needed for different domains: military, social services, health, taxation, etc. Access to review of government decisions is a key component for all public institutions as it supports access to justice, so all government systems need to maintain the ability to record, explain and monitor automated decision making. Governments also have very specific requirements as set out in privacy and data handling legislation (such as the [Privacy Act 1988 \(Cth\)](#)) to enable transparency of use, appropriate use and disclosure, and protection of personal information and personal privacy.

Most things done in government are ostensibly in the pursuit of a policy objective and for public good. Measuring and monitoring the **policy impact** over time is critical to assuring that the policy intent is met, but monitoring and measuring the **human impact** is also critical to ensuring a net positive impact for society with limited unintended harms. Both types of measurements can feed into policy iteration and responsiveness to change. This is different in the private sector, which is primarily driven by a financial imperative. Finally, there is always a constitutional and/or legislative context and mandate for public institutions, which they need to deliver upon. This context is important for designing systems that are both compliant with legislation and aligned to the purpose and mandate of the specific public institution in their specific jurisdiction, in contrast with commercial systems.

Finally, and most importantly, governments have high impact levers that no other sectors have. The various branches of government can investigate, penalise, censure, enforce, seize assets, institutionalise, or incarcerate. Strict controls are very important to ensure these powers are not abused and to maintain public confidence and continued legitimacy. The separation between the executive and judicial branches of government is helpful for trust by ensuring that everyone, including government institutions and officials, can be equally held to account under the Rule of Law. While many people may share large amounts of personal data with private sector technology platforms such as Google or Facebook, they have a choice as to which services to use, and what to share, and those companies do not have the power to imprison them or take their children away. People do not have the choice to not interact with government and rarely have the choice of which governments to interact with. This context is extremely important because if government systems are not fair, equitable, lawful, appealable, etc, then the real impact on people's lives can be, and has been, devastating.

Governments affect people's lives, ideally for the better, but sometimes for the worse. As governments increasingly digitise, automate and adopt AI/ADM, government systems must be designed to live up to basic expectations of delivering public good, fairly. And if they do not, mechanisms are needed to prove that, and on which to base corrective action.

So how can you build trustworthy systems in government? It is useful to clearly articulate the requirements for building and maintaining trustworthy systems in the special context of the public sector. These six questions should be put at the heart of the design of all policies and services, to help make them more trustworthy:

1. How would you audit and monitor the decisions/actions made, their accuracy and their legal authority, in real time?
2. How would an end user (citizen, resident, etc) know, understand, challenge and appeal a decision/action?
3. How would you know whether this action/process is having a fair, positive or negative impact?
4. How would you ensure, maintain and demonstrate independent oversight and effective governance?
5. How would you detect, respond to and implement continuous change, external or internal?
6. How can your organisation operate in a way the public would consider 'trustworthy'?

Every government system demands a solid answer for **all** of these questions, but the ultimate test is to **ask people** what would make a relationship with a particular agency trustworthy (which will vary according to the mandate of the agency) and implement measures accordingly, rather than assume or demand trust. Trust is situational and contingent to the context of legislation and the scope of the institution that seeks to gain and maintain that trust. Mapping the end to end 'user journey' or process for these questions inevitably forces us to dig into several likely features of a high trust system.

Finally, maintaining trust requires mechanisms that can constantly test trustworthiness.

FOI is critical but has been abused on all sides. Proactive publishing of information, statistics and data by departments can help, but there needs to be greater commitment to FOI as an important part

of a modern and trustworthy public sector. Broad political priorities vary with the administration in power, but the skills infrastructure to respond to these have become unclear. The very disclosure required to engage and adapt propositions as they develop can be deemed breaking confidences, and freedom of information efforts by the community to even be able to engage treated as nuisances that can best be handled by under resourcing and thus stretching out any responses far beyond the period when the interaction that could be enabled are still open to it. This has been a very successful strategy for quarantining both the development of policies and protecting those initiating or developing them.

Better resourcing of FOI requests would address both systemic failures and open pathways for informed and constructive engagement. To accept this requires a cultural change at senior levels, and a very different attitude to the FOI process, which could easily become an invaluable part of policy development. The ramifications of adopting this perspective will be explored later, as they are matters of administrative policy and action rather than one of principle once this necessity is accepted.

It would be helpful to minimise the use of NDAs for consultations, because when an NDAs is a condition for participation in consultations it disempowers the members of every organisation invited to participate, and reduces the input that has to be handled as much as possible, while enabling the wide quotation of ‘consultation’ of the large numbers represented by these bodies invited in under NDA conditions. The demonstrably very low levels of policy engagement with their members are a standing sore for at least the COTA and national seniors body members in the recent aged care revisions, producing the ideal dual outcomes of claims to consultation to the maximum numbers possible while shutting down any meaningful input and maximum self-satisfaction for the parties in these bodies actually brought into the process.

Step 3.4: From good services to great services

Trust in public institutions is directly affected by the experience people have with “government”, in all forms, and most people deal with government most regularly through services. When individuals or communities have a poor, stressful or indeed harmful experience with public institutions or services provided by the public sector, then distrust grows and can bleed into distrust across the board, including individuals and communities simply not respecting as legitimate the services, policies, laws or democratic outcomes administered by the public sector.

As such, great services are necessary to maintain public trust and perceived legitimacy, which has a direct impact on the necessary expertise needed in modern public institutions.

Public institutions have been increasingly dramatically improving the quality, availability and delivery of public services to the people and communities of Australia; to better serve people and ensure they get the help they need and are entitled to. Even the most exemplary public institution will be judged in part for the quality of public experience with that institution, which means public facing information and services need to be easy to find, easy to use, helpful, transparent and dignified way.

Great service delivery relies on well supported channels that the public use to seek and receive services from agencies. A “channel” necessarily involves incorporation of all aspects of service delivery from support and assistance in accessing a service, through different delivery methods (eg online or in person), along with the management, continuous improvement and holistic reporting on service performance and effectiveness. Channels are important as they are the face and experience for citizens of public services. So citizen-centric design, channel management, and expertise in omni-channel service delivery (in person, phone and online) is necessary to ensure the experience of a person with one channel is not substandard to another, which can create a form of inequity, especially for individuals or communities trapped in the “digital divide”.

Even basic communications would ideally take an omni-channel approach. The reliance on digital communications to even tell the community that consultations are open creates vulnerabilities to all the vagaries of both email and web utilisation and access, and the well-known shortfalls that occur are all too easily used to cover any systemic failures to communicate with parties whose input is less than welcome. How would an individual be able to find out about a consultation if they weren't online? Should public sector communications look to share information in non-digital forms? Through community organisations, media, newsletters, SMS, etc? How would an individual know whether a communication was authentically from a public institution? These are all challenges to address.

User needs and technology choices change constantly, so modern service delivery also requires expertise on funding and operating models that support continuous delivery of user research, user testing and service improvements. Funding and operating models that limit or avoid continuous improvement always end up with services that don't keep up with the expectations and needs of the public, creating unnecessary challenges and barriers to public service delivery.

Further recommendations below speak to the expertise needed to drive different outcomes from public services.

Expertise to support measurably good human outcomes

- Engage with diverse communities to create measurement frameworks and to co-design policy, services and to ensure alignment of programs and delivery to public values and public good
- Implement the Wellness Framework across the government, including in service delivery measures, budgets, business cases analysis, prioritisation frameworks, policy assurance
- Create and implement government service standards (ideally based on an omni-channel model) that embeds and normalises a dignified experience across all channels with a positive outcome for the individual and community

- Proactively monitor quality of life outcomes at a process and line of business/service scale
- Link all activities to purpose, human outcomes and policy intent in a publicly accessible framework

Expertise to respond to machines as users and proactive operating models

- Map and monitor for the use of government data and services by machine agents and ensure constructive/positive uses are enabled whilst negative or destructive/harmful uses are mitigated and escalated in real time
- Actively plan and monitor for “good” machine usage and mitigate “bad” machines
- Assume a level of scale that dramatically outpaces human interventions or human in the loop
- Assume continuous change, intrinsic and extrinsic, and actively monitor for change with real time escalation of issues in government services and policy interventions
- Use agile, test driven, user-centric & scalable techniques to create a policy-service spectrum that meets the evolving needs of citizens

Expertise for safe and ethically motivated teams and organisational structures

- Create a mandate and time to think and evaluate the best approach, not just the expedient one. Simple tactics like building a 10% innovation time built into “business as usual” operations and resourcing
- Create a situational awareness of emerging trends and respond strategically and timely in the interests of the public
- Develop systemic incentives that drive “good” outcomes, like openness as a principle

- Empower and commission teams to build cultures that value peer review, transparency and purpose
- Include human measures in executive KPIs and reporting for agencies and drive accountability, especially for executives, to help nudge good decisions

Expertise to support traceable and accountable services

- Ability to establish real time feedback loops and mechanisms to detect and disrupt light and dark patterns, whilst strengthening the democratic system against abuse and gamification, with rapid escalation mechanisms and multi-disciplinary, cross sector collaboration
- Where the public sector is clearly an authority or source of truth, the relevant public institutions should operate and make data and information available in an accessible, verifiable and trustworthy way (eg, weather data, emergency warnings, national statistics)
- Ensure, agree and document the principles and practices of administrative law across government to guide and drive the ethical and transparent use of digital, data and AI practices as they have evolved in recent decades
- Establish a ‘better rules’ approach for all new legislation and regulation, with publicly available reference implementations of all legislation and regulation as code, for transparency and greater ease of public validation of decisions, policies and service delivery
- Create a means of capturing decisions, based on what rules were invoked and with what authority to drive greater ease of auditing, visibility and appealability by individual citizens.
- Assure compliance with administrative law internally and externally, with automated monitoring and escalation of decisions and transactive processes
- Develop active and continuous feedback loops from delivery back into policy/legislative improvement to provide for continuous improvement

Step 3.5: Establish mechanisms for expertise mobility

The issues identified previously underpin a specifically participatory set of cultures, both within and outside the public service itself. Many different countries have attempted to address this in an ad hoc manner, one mode (used in the UK) by hauling in executives from senior levels in regulated industries for a year or two to regulate their own industry. A concrete example was a senior insurance industry executive brought into the UK Department of Trade and Industry who not only developed better regulatory structures for his one industry but put several insurance companies (rightly) out of business. His reforms did not survive his departure.

It would be a mistake to consider that changes only need to be made within the public service. The community has become distanced from the operations of the public service and certainly does not understand its complexity and the exercise of sometimes inappropriate political demands for implementation. Partly the fault of limited exchanges with the broader communities, but just as much by the loss of good quality civics education at schools or universities, and this translates to a lack of understanding about public institutions and our democracy in various professional settings across sectors.

General expertise about the public sectors, democracy and civics would help ensure a better-informed population, which would ideally translate to a better engaged population. Expertise mobility across and between organisations, sectors, age brackets and across disciplines would all help public institutions to be more connected and responsive to change, while also helping to ensure a broad and deep range of expertise to inform public policy and services.

A great lesson from Taiwan to apply would be the strategic engagement of older (retired) and younger (school age) communities, who tend to have a little more time than working age people (especially those who also have children). Engaging younger and older communities provides both a range of experience, expectations and quite a broad range of needs, from people who may just have a little more time to contribute than the average person who is full time at work and full time at home.

The high levels of skills, experience – and indeed professional and personal networks – of older and retired people inside and outside the public service would yield enormous insights to inform and support public sector work, providing also a means for building trust for the extended communities and family of those who are engaged. Engaging young people would draw upon their hopes and aspirations for Australia, and bring a means to identify emerging trends, challenges and opportunities to shape policies and programs that support young people to thrive and contribute to the community.

Academic alumni also provide a pool of highly expert and experienced people who could bring domestic and international knowledge to public institutions. There has recently been an unhealthy move in the academic sector to regard such people as ‘expensive’ or ‘competitive’ with new staff or structures. We hear of deans (Melbourne is an example) and whole universities (Wollongong is an example) taking the stance that honoraries are ‘expensive’ (and considered unwanted internal competitors). Yet these people have a range of experiences and can be ex-professors with global and local networks, happy to contribute, mentor and supervise simply for the chance to contribute and access to university libraries to help create publications and teaching for the universities direct benefit. If the public sector adopted an engaged approach towards academic honoraries and casuals to permeate the public service, that would instantly improve expertise and capability uplift.

Reading the terms of work for the public service some alarming features that have crept in include the heavy use of ‘customers’, ‘consumers’ and ‘business models and units’. This language carries far too many overtones anathema to an effective public service culture that rethinking and relabelling terms would be a subtle way of changing how processes and people are regarded. Language matters, as Don Watson eloquently addressed in his book *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (2003), which addresses the issue of business/marketing language creating barriers to meaningful communications and even perverse incentives in public institutions.

Corrective steps need to be taken in HR functions to ensure expertise is valued in recruitment and performance management activities. All SES should be required to demonstrate some knowledge of public sector

accountabilities and obligations (even if they are coming from outside of the public service, this knowledge is attainable) as it is necessary from day one for a senior executive to be able to properly and responsibly exercise their delegations.

Additional changes to improve expertise mobility might include:

- Cross sector and cross jurisdictional secondments – secondments to and from various bodies provides enormous opportunities for growing, maintaining, retaining and attracting expertise. Canada does this well with their Interchange program. Imagine if Australian governments had a program for public servants to do a work exchange with other jurisdictions across the region, to both uplift the capability of the region more broadly, but also to provide a little more attractiveness in working in public sectors, providing a means for talented and young workers to advance without feeling like they have to move overseas
- Requiring demonstrable transferable skills, including technical expertise in the domain being recruited for. This is more complex than it appears, as the rates of change in many fields are now rising rapidly, and demonstrated ability to adapt and deal with areas requiring understanding of overlapping and changing fields will be necessary. Clearly this requirement will demand specialist training to address shared purpose, shared behaviours, explicitly addressing discipline frictions etc
- A structured training course that all public servants would take, including spells in different functions, clarifying not only their accountabilities but also how that are measured within the service and how they are perceived outside it

Step 3.6: Be authentically a part of society, not separate to it

Public servants should join communities of interest to share expertise, be visible and help to rebuild a public servant presence in our society. While public servants continue to be invisible in the public domain,

it is too easy for those who benefit from a hamstrung public sector to continue to vilify and proclaim public sector incompetence. Arguably, public sector expertise could help provide a small but useful counterpoint to the increasing tsunami of dis- and misinformation.

Achieving a genuinely publicly engaged public service requires a few simple things:

- Use clear, meaningful language always, whether in a business case, blog, media release, strategy document or report
- Actively be a public source of facts for things that the public sector is uniquely authoritative on, regardless of the government of the day. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has been exemplary at this for many years, but all public institutions have information they are authoritative for and should share that information publicly and regularly
- Purposefully recognise and support both the official and unofficial voices of public sectors. Professional comms teams should certainly be responsible for the official voice of an organisation, but all public servants should be encouraged and supported to engage outside their organisations and online in professional discussions with others, with only the sorts of reasonable limitations that you would expect in any organisation. Encouraging and supporting public servants to engage respectfully in the public sphere as professionals with their own voice doesn't just make public sector expertise more visible to improve public trust and confidence, but it provides a healthy means to seek peer review and support contestability to always be seeking the best possible information and solutions. Operational blogs, social media, speeches at public events are all great ways to share, test and improve the work of our public sectors more broadly
- Public servants should be encouraged to join communities of practice, professional bodies and community organisations, not just to stay more connected to the public they serve, but to seek and continuously improve the different forms of expertise required in their professional lives

- Share information and data as openly as possible. The opening up of data and information can be extremely valuable in combating misinformation, especially where public institutions contribute facts into the public domain which the public sector is uniquely authoritative (eg weather data, budgets, election results, social service or migration statistics). Actively publishing reports, insights, research and other information doesn't just help to populate the public domain with high-value expertise and knowledge from the public sector, but helps to grow and maintain public confidence, trust and engagement
- Finally, empower communications teams to do what they do well without trying to do it all. A lot of policy and program people paint their communications teams as "bottlenecks" but perhaps they can be more like a support function, balancing the priorities of stakeholders who were deeply interested in the work of their internal clients (but deemed irrelevant by those clients), as well as the needs of journalists, bloggers, political parties, other program areas and internal-to-government stakeholders. It's also important to distinguish between marketing and strategy. Marketing is about the good news story. Strategy is about making important links and tying a project's messaging to the overall agenda. There is reason to believe that many communications teams are pushed into pure marketing activities when they could be so much more helpful as a highly skilled capability to support broad public engagement and visibility by many public servants

It is also critical for public sector integrity and trust that public institutions ensure that authoritative expertise, information and communications from the public sector can be validated as authentic, given how much misinformation and social media manipulation now exists. The evolution and maturation of scams, deep fakes and social engineering means public institutions need to make it easy for people to differentiate what is true from the false, at least when it comes to information the public sector is uniquely responsible for. Some ideas to help address this challenge include:

- Official information/communications validation: it would clearly be impossible to provide a service to verify the authenticity of all

information on the internet for citizens. The scale of new content being generated, by humans and increasingly by bots and software, is impossible to manage through traditional escalation and review methods. But there are some types of information that could be made available in a more verifiable way, for example official or political content. For instance, the Australian Electoral Commission could provide a real-time electoral, political and public sector messages/information validation service. Citizens could use such a service to check the authenticity/source of political and official messages about the next election and to distinguish deep fakes from authentic official materials. This can be complemented with public awareness campaigns

- Provide education services, directly and in partnership with trusted community entities and organisations, with a campaign to raise public awareness about misinformation, deep fakes and the increasing likelihood of being actively gamed by domestic and international actors, especially around election time. Make it easy for people to report or check whether something is real or fake and introduce incentives and gamification for identifying threats to society, engaging the public in their own safety and online wellbeing
- The public sector could prioritise the proactive and verifiable publishing of all information for which the public sector is authoritative, to help contribute facts and data to the public domain
- In an increasingly educated community, all data that can be made public needs to be made accessible. This is a key tool for ameliorating both communication and trust shortfalls
- Some of the intelligence around threats and radicalisation efforts from government operations could potentially feed into broader public engagement efforts early, as they are likely in a position to identify early patterns of misinformation
- Citizens have a broad range of independent organisations they trust and engage with every day, such as public libraries, community centres, non-government social service organisations and resource centres. If the public sector collaborated more strategically with

these organisations, including to share information, patterns and insights to entities and organisations that the public trust, it could help them support their communities navigate truth and authenticity. Such information services would need to be constrained to factual information because if such a pipeline of information was set up and used in any way for political or ideologically motivated information sharing, then those organisations would likely disengage

- The key resource of the Australasian Legal Information Institute (www.austlii.edu.au) which contains the majority of legal statutes, state and federal, but although built on a huge number of many years should be retained in its current location, but given assured, solid, continuing funding by central government given its key value to all parties as the single, coherent, and trustworthy source that it has become. As an essential part of this underpinning it should now be extended include the up to date Policy Manuals for Departments. This would go a long way towards completing a common factual basis of documentation to include materials not currently available to the broader community, but which have now proved necessary to engender greater trust

Step 3.7: Promote the importance and attractiveness of public service

Finally, the public sector is truly an incredible place to work, providing opportunities to deal with some of the most complex and impactful work you could imagine, at a scale generally not experienced in any other sector. This value proposition is often not included in marketing or recruitment drives and isn't always front and centre in the projected identity and reputation of public service. Positioning and encouraging people to contribute to their communities and the prosperity, security and wellbeing of the nation through public service would not just help with talent attraction and retention, but would help to shift the public perspective, engagement with and understanding of the point and purpose of public institutions and public servants.

Working in any organisation or sector has its challenges, but the public sector has become everyone's favourite punching bag, presumed to be bloated, inefficient, stagnant and void of innovation, while also paying pay less for expertise than the private sector. The reality of public service is that it is precisely because of the complexity, purposefulness and scale that many public servants are necessarily innovative, extremely driven and trying to find ways to improve and adapt to change on behalf of the communities they serve. Some constraints are necessary to help avoid harm or harmful behaviours, but no one is more motivated to modernise and mitigate unhelpful barriers than a committed public servant.

In many countries, the public service is considered a prestigious and respectable place to work. In Australia, the public service doesn't broadly hold a high reputation, arguably due to decades of having its narrative managed external to the public sector, sometimes by those who benefit from a weakened public service.

When the importance, attractiveness and mission of working in public institutions is shared and promoted, it doesn't just strengthen the attractiveness for talent to join the public sector, but it improves the existential confidence of public servants who in turn inspire and can engage effectively with talent and expertise.

Epilogue

This book has attempted to articulate the history and context that created an unfortunate gap between decision-making and the expertise needed to inform it, which we have framed as the “expertise deficit”. We also provided an optimistic vision for what is possible, with a holistic proposal for how to get there, as a hopefully useful contribution to public sector reform.

We hope the book provides insights into the complexity of how public sectors came to this point, some ideas for what ‘good’ could look like, and some practical ideas for how to remediate the expertise deficit in a holistic and sustainable way. Ultimately, too many people see expertise as simply something recruited or procured, but without the kinds of systemic, cultural and structural remediations proposed in this book, expertise will continue to be used inconsistently, ineffectively and inappropriately, often in the pursuit of outcomes and goals that do not coincide with the purpose of a public sector existing at all.

In 2024 and 2025, we have seen the rise of autocracies become not just socialised but increasingly valued by people in democratic nations around the world (Naim, 2023). The disempowerment felt by the community is now gaining increasing consideration in democratic countries (Campbell, 2023), which in turn has affected electoral outcomes. This has unfortunately translated into populist politics amplified by social media, rather than informed public dialogue or evidence-driven policies aimed at resolving the source(s) of disempowerment (such as costs of living or inequitable access to services). As we look forward, it is important for Australia and for other nations that value a functional democracy that public institutions (and the public sector writ large) is confident and capable to not just deliver public value and policy outcomes, but to recognise and value the important role it can play in providing a check and balance on what would otherwise be unbridled political power.

The public sector, in practice, is a design and delivery mechanism of a constitutional and legislative mandate, policy change, emergency response, public services, national security, economic management

and reform. When the worst is happening in a political system, a weak, low expertise and highly directed public sector would be complicit. But a strong, high expertise, engaged and confident public sector would act as a trusted and trustworthy counterweight to balance and resolve issues while continuing to serve and steward the best interests of the nation, including the government, the Parliament and the people. Strong expertise informed by strong values and guided by purpose is all necessary for public sectors to deliver their accountabilities in the best possible way, with the best possible outcomes and impact.

The very presence of and public visibility of public sector expertise, experience and genuine commitment to service wouldn't just help to change public perceptions but would provide a genuinely beneficial and useful contribution of expertise and knowledge to the public domain. This would be an invaluable way for the public sector to help inoculate the community against the devastating impacts of misinformation and manipulation.

This role of an expert and highly engaged public sector as a necessary and valued ballast for a healthy democratic society may have been steadily de-emphasised in Australia for decades, but in the age of constant change, perpetual crises and AI-generated misinformation, this role must once again be recognised as critical to ensuring a balanced, equitable and participatory society where people and communities can thrive.

Appendix:

Consequences of an expertise deficit

When an expertise deficit is not addressed, the consequences are significant. The following examples demonstrate the consequences of an expertise deficit, both to illustrate the problem and to bring the features raised into sharp focus.

A trust deficit: disengagement, selective evidence and echo chambers

Trust has been negatively impacted by the expertise deficit in several ways. Firstly, as expertise has been applied within departments in an increasingly fragmented way, each function has been incentivised to count success as having completed their small part of the puzzle, without anyone being incentivised (or empowered) to deliver the policy or public outcome, overall. Communications teams measure success in clicks and public sentiment. Operational teams measure success in throughput or savings. Program and budget teams measure success in funding secured. Grants teams measure success in the number of grants and funding distributed. Policy teams measure success in options agreed by the respective minister. Everyone should ideally be able to show how they are contributing to the policy outcomes, the purpose/mission and ultimately the value to the public.

Trust has also been impacted by the increase in perceived and real mechanisation of public services and institutions, including the often unconsulted shift to digital channels while closing non-digital options (like phone or in-person services). The digitisation of manual or paper processes across the breadth of public service functions have ostensibly delivered operational efficiencies or savings while often creating opaque and inscrutable systems that can disempower the people that

use them. Media releases about successful services based on savings or efficiencies can create trust issues if the public experience of those services is less than satisfactory. Even if the department has invested in creating a great user experience, if the service/system is difficult to understand or appeal decisions, or unable to detect and minimise any unintentional harm, services can emerge that are simultaneously easier to use but harder to trust. Most government services and systems are measured in terms of productivity, efficiency and user experience, but not measured in terms of policy outcomes or human benefits, making it hard to understand or improve the impact of these systems/services on real people. The recent and reasonable concerns about AI, including the issues of bias, exception management and application within these decision-making processes is critical to address with transparency and public engagement. Capturing and assuring the explainability of a decision or action taken by the public service is critical for the ability to audit, appeal, and maintain both the reality and perception of integrity of our public institutions. It is also critical for ensuring the actions and decisions are lawful, permitted, correctly executed and properly recorded for posterity, especially where it relates to anything that directly impacts people — like social services, taxation, justice, regulation, or penalties.

When internal expertise becomes disengaged from engagement processes, it becomes nearly impossible to assess the usefulness or authenticity of expert contributions, internally or externally, and creates trust issues with experts internally and externally. As an increasing number of public sector leaders became distant from domain expertise, under the duress of a constant and increasing sense of urgency, over-reactive to political directives, and in the absence of clear and prioritised purpose, it has become both harder and less desirable to engage with expertise, especially public contributions. After all, what happens if the expertise or lived experience learned through research or public engagement conflicts with the direction set by the manager, secretary or minister? In an evidence-driven public institution, such conflicts are actively sought out to ensure the most well-informed, evidence-driven and purpose aligned approach is always taken (whether for policy, advice or delivery). It is only in public institutions that are not actively balancing the need to serve the government, the Parliament and the

Australian public (the first main objective of the *Australian Public Service Act 1999*) that an “expertise avoidance” pattern of behaviour can emerge and be normalised.

Engagement with research and academic experts has also become harder, as the education sector adopted the same business models and rhetoric of the public sector, positioning researchers and academic experts as contestable experts that compete for contracts with public institutions alongside the private sector. The traditional and healthily uncomfortable relationship between policy and research became quickly replaced with commercial arrangements, where uncomfortable evidence or truths were always under the pressure of commercial viability. The trust and independence of the research sector became undervalued and underutilised, and the same public narrative that positioned public servants as incompetent was extended to science and research, completing an echo chamber of private sector expertise driving profitable and self-serving outcomes rather than driving genuinely evidence-based policy or public outcomes.

The functional segmentation and professionalisation of public institutions made “public engagement” the responsibility and domain of media and communications professionals rather than general public servants. This made it harder for general public servants (including policy and delivery teams who would traditionally have engaged directly and who most benefit from public engagement) to create authentic and persistent relationships with the communities they serve, creating a structural and systemic air gap between those wanting to engage and those engaged. The unfortunate side effect has been a diminishing of both the effectiveness and authenticity of public engagement.

Subsequently, in the absence of effective recognition of, engagement with or leveraging of genuine expertise both internally and externally, the value of trusted, reliable and independent experts became commoditised and commercialised by an industry of consultants who were more than happy to find (or create) evidence and “expert” contributions that supported whatever direction was asked, as has been revealed by numerous parliamentary and media investigations.

The slow process of disentangling the successful manipulation of conditions with these approaches and tools has been shown by Oreskes and Watson (2010) in tobacco lobbying, where decades of independent research were neutralised by “evidence” manufactured by the tobacco industry.

Arguably the greatest cost has been trust in public institutions and research institutions, which has steadily declined. The expertise and experience of both sectors have increasingly been selectively used or ignored as befits the agenda of the day, and as both sectors have been increasingly publicly disparaged, the value and perceived legitimacy of both has also declined, creating significant fear, uncertainty and doubt about anything to do with government or science, a dangerous combination in an uncertain world with an increasingly manipulated public sphere.

Unfortunately, the internet and impact of democratised publishing pushed the fourth estate to be increasingly fragmented, popularist and uncritically reporting on events. This has led to the media increasingly behaving as political actors in their own right, further reducing the reliability, authenticity and trustworthiness of information and views reaching the general public. People have begun to trust more what they see shared by their circle of friends and family than anything they see shared by public institutions, researchers or the media, which has been and is increasingly manipulated by malicious actors, for profit or power. There is very little left for people to trust outside their immediate friendship and family circles, which is exactly where misinformation is most effectively targeted and spread.

No longer can the public sector depend on a ‘quality press’, which is now degraded and competing with small independent presses and think tanks that are often far from even-handed themselves (see Oreskes and Conway, 2010). If the public sector cannot communicate and engage directly with the public to be demonstrably competent and trustworthy, then they are left with being represented by others and on social networks with all the problems that they have so clearly demonstrated.

The need for public institutions to be actually and perceived to be independent from politics is critical to addressing the natural distrust people have in politics. The unrestricted movements of politicians

and staffers (with their networks, access and influence) directly from Ministries to lobby groups, think tanks and public institutions, especially into positions of leadership, has further accelerated distrust and uncertainty in the bases and biases underlying the advice given and the actions undertaken in power and public service.

To be a trusted adviser for an informed democracy, the public sector must always be required and seen to explain administrative decision-making, with public servants only making decisions within their delegated power, considering relevant evidence, and providing decisions together with the reasons and authority for the decision and easy to access avenues for appeal. It also means a high requirement on public servants to differentiate fact from fiction and provide publicly discoverable and trustworthy information where the public institutions are authoritative sources. The public sector is uniquely experienced and obligated in these respects. The public service challenge is to mobilise this experience and ensure the principle and practices of Administrative Law and good public administration are always upheld and well communicated in an increasingly complex, technologically savvy and fast-paced world.

As we plan for the impacts and opportunities of the age of Artificial Intelligence, public sectors should also be actively planning what a desirable and augmented society and public sector could look like, one that embeds values, trust, reliability and accountability at the heart of everything done, while using machines to support better responsiveness, modelling, service delivery and the diligent and proactive protection of the people and communities served. There is a serious opportunity to combine modern tools with participatory governance to reimagine and humanise government policies and services. As it stands, the incremental and iterative implementations of new technologies, including most AI projects, are likely to deliver more inhuman and mechanised public services, less and less capable of providing a person at the end of any more complex inquiry—or less confident inquirer. If the design of the process doesn't take this into account, Australia risks missing the opportunity to design a modern public service that gets the best of humans and machines working together for the best public and community outcomes. The worst

possible outcome is to be continually playing catch-up against the rapidly evolving misinformation technologies that already exist, already deployed against the general population.

There has been recent precedent on the legitimacy of automated decision making and auditability in the Australian courts. In late 2018, the landmark court case of [Joe Pintarich v Deputy Commissioner of Taxation](#) ruled that an automated piece of correspondence was not considered a ‘decision’ because there was no (human) mental process accompanying it. This creates a question of legitimacy for all machine-generated decisions in Australia as was stated in substantial detail by the dissenting judge. But it should also be a major driver for agencies to invest in and mandate explainability and oversight mechanisms for all systems that produce administrative decisions, ideally with explanations proactively provided and recorded for posterity, so that public institution decisions can be trusted by the public.

The important work to transform the public sector to operate in a more trustworthy way would result in open, engaged, auditable and fair government for the digital age, with high quality and trusted services that provide a dignified experience for the community and a genuine increase in public trust and confidence in public institutions. This would position government sectors, services, policies and capabilities as trusted and adaptive foundations for the future.

A context deficit: when business methods are blindly applied to public services

There is a special context of the public sector, which is not universally known or understood, even by many of the people working in or with the public sector. The public sector must necessarily serve all members of the community, whereas a business can focus on a particular “market segment” that suits their purpose or profitability. The public sector should drive sustainable and equitable public good and policy outcomes, whereas the private sector is driven systemically primarily by a profit imperative. The public sector has a significant range of powers and authority, which can improve or devastate lives, in contrast to businesses which do not have such powers, and as we all know, with

great power comes great responsibility. Part of the reason for all the additional controls and processes required in the public sector is meant to be a means to ensure any issues are identified before they affect the entire population. Sadly, most of this “beige tape” (bureaucratic regulation) is currently more focused on compliance and personal/reputation risk mitigation than on identifying and addressing potential or emergent harms of public services, systems or policies.

Public sector services must be high quality, dignified and trustworthy, as citizens want to feel supported, empowered, respected and confident in the public sector to help them when they need it. Reform of public sector services is a critical part of ensuring and growing public trust in public institutions. When you bring the language, processes and incentives of “business” into the public sector without applying the special context of government, you run the risk of unintended and significant impacts on individuals and the community, including on their trust in public sectors.

A major difficulty in public versus private service philosophies is that private sector can — and indeed has to — segment their markets and pick which to serve well and which to abandon: usually from a mixture of costs and profitability in serving a particular segment, but also equally often because they have to refine exactly what business they are in as a continuing strategy.

In recent years there has been a somewhat helpful adoption of a business trend in government, with a marked shift from simply digitising government to bringing a “user-centred” approach into the public sector. The global eGovernment agenda was largely focused on digitising paper and processes but did not result in much anticipated financial benefits, but the later “user-centric approach” created significant benefits by actually improving the quality of services (OECD, 2009). The need for this shift was also fuelled by changing expectations in the public from their improved experience with services from the private sector, resulting in a significant and genuinely transformational shift towards designing and delivering a great experience for people interacting with public services, though the benefits are not always evenly felt. The service delivery improvements of the private sector provided some good lessons and practices for public sectors around

prioritising a great “customer experience” (CX) and focusing efforts around continuously addressing “customer needs”. This shift was a healthy one as it created a culture and practice of thinking first about the experience of those interacting with public services. This normalised in many public institutions the practices of user research, of measuring and optimising investment for a great user experience, of a continuous improvement approach to how public services are managed, and a whole new service-oriented and empathetic front-line culture, creating a more helpful public servant approach to supporting the community to access public services.

A secondary benefit of this shift was realised in some places when the “customer experience” (CX) approach was strategically and widely applied. When functions that don’t consider themselves service providers have to consider a CX lens, you can get some great results: regulators considering the experience of regulated entities which can lead to better drafted rules and improved compliance; legislators considering the experience of anyone (including service delivery departments) using the legislation; or policy teams considering and starting to (re)engage with the experience of people who might be affected by new policy positions. “CX” has created a helpful systemic and structural lever to embed and continuously strengthen institutional and cultural empathy. Something that had been systemically hollowed out from decades of efficiency as the dominant imperative. Imagine the benefits and opportunities for a more holistic and adaptive public sector if the same empathy, feedback loops and continuous improvement operating models that are needed for great service delivery were implemented at all levels and stages of policy and program design/delivery.

The “user/customer-centred design” was also combined with a “digital first” approach, which both improved the quality and access of services online, while simultaneously and unfortunately creating a not insignificant challenge around digital exclusion (especially for people who struggle online or to self-serve) and systemic invisibility of the broader public and policy impacts. Success of public services is often measured in efficiency or user experience terms, but the program/policy outcomes and unintended public impacts are not similarly measured, monitored for or proactively managed. Where public institutions

struggle with trust, there is often a reluctance (or inability) of the affected communities or groups to engage in the forms that services are provided, even when services are well designed.

When the main incentive for public services becomes efficiency, and “a seamless experience”, it ignores the fact that public services are a means for people to exercise and access their rights.

The Citizens Advice Bureau in New Zealand captured this best in their report “Face to Face with Digital Exclusion” which explicitly spoke to the challenges created:

*“The government has a legal obligation in its provision of public services to ensure that it does not exclude people from the services, rights and entitlements they are trying to access. Many government services are particularly important for already-marginalised groups within the community: people with disabilities, Māori and Pacific Peoples, older people, and those for whom English is not a first language. **Access to government services is a human right.**”*

Unfortunately, what this report shows is that many people are becoming stressed, frustrated and excluded in their attempts to engage with government services. While online services can dramatically improve the experience of those who engage digitally, services must be designed and provided in a way that accommodates everyone, including those who are not online. We acknowledge the government’s focus on wellbeing and hope the insights provided by this report will lead to a commitment to deliver services in ways that support the wellbeing of everyone.

Taking a rights-based approach will help ensure that disadvantaged individuals and communities are neither overlooked nor left behind.”

The importing service delivery transformation methods from the private sector into the public sector created two systemic challenges, both of which can be remediated when public servants shape these methods into the special context of government:

1. This **profit imperative** of service improvements in business was imported into the public sector under the guise of cost savings and

efficiency. This translated into early service reform efforts being justified by the promise of savings, creating a pressure to prioritise and encourage the public into using digital channels, as they were assumed (and modelled) to be cheaper. Digital transformation was therefore often complemented by consolidation of non-digital channels, reducing the options and access for anyone incapable, uncomfortable or simply not served through new simplified digital channels. As digital disintermediation continues, often the dominant goal is a financial agenda to cut costs through ‘simplification’, but the issue of the public ability to handle the delivery modes chosen becomes extremely important. Comments about ‘education to fix the digital divide’ puts the onus onto the public for their ability to use public services, and infantilises the entire population, especially the near quarter of the population (and rapidly growing) that are designated ‘old’ or ‘elderly’. This can become an excuse for not tailoring the user experience to the expectations and capacities of EVERY group. One generic example for a large group in society illustrates this, namely the steady disappearance of cash as an accepted means of exchange. Given the rising issues of a de-emphasis of cash, the ‘digital divide’ has become a critical issue, but is not coherently treated as one. It is unreasonable to blame this entirely on the public service as major ‘representative’ groups are often relied upon (typically COTA and National Seniors for older groups) but are also systematically excluding the many experts in their membership, particularly in largely self-governing groups leading to limited engagement of the target groups and under use of the expertise available. This is already becoming a real issue for the older groups as ageism is so deeply embedded in society.

2. The **language of “customer”** whilst creating a culture committed to a good quality of service, doesn’t always reflect the full nature of the relationship between people and public institutions. Members of the public do want a great “customer experience”, but they also expect their rights to be upheld and for public institutions to operate in a trustworthy and accountable way, more so than is expected of a business. However, with efficiencies and CX as the main driver, we started to see increasingly beautiful and efficient

services that started to lose impactfulness and policy efficacy. Many “customers” of public sectors aren’t really customers in any case, in that they don’t have an option to get the service elsewhere. This creates some strange results when blindly applying private sector methods to service delivery in government. For instance, a “Net Promoter Score” is when you are asked “would you recommend this service to a friend?” and in private sector, this provides a helpful indicator for the quality of a service. However, if you were asked “would you recommend this service to a friend?” about an emergency payment or critical social service, then even if the quality was terrible, you’d still be inclined to give a high score, because you know others who are also in urgent need of the emergency payment or social service, thus creating a less clear picture of the service quality or experience.

This is not to say that processes or methods should not be adopted from different sectors, but just to say that new methods should be carefully and thoughtfully shaped to meet the special context of government, and to ensure a great customer experience is complemented by a great “citizen/resident/refugee experience” and then validated over time that this is indeed the case.

For example, if a great “customer experience” is about service delivery that is quick, easy, personalised, helpful and delightful, then perhaps a great “citizen/resident/refugee experience” is one that is equitable, dignified, rights enabling and providing personal agency. After all, what is helpful to one person can easily be creepy to another, so public services need to provide choice for individuals to scale up or down the “helpfulness” of their experience with public institutions. Public services should measure policy and human metrics alongside performance and CX metrics, to ensure public services aren’t just efficient and high quality but are also contributing to personal and community wellbeing. So public institutions could simply extend their CX (Customer Experience) operating models to be a more broadly useful CCX (Customer–Citizen Experience) approach. Ways of addressing some of the structural barriers to securing ‘good customer experience’ are addressed in later sections, as is the special context of the public sector and how this should be trained as part of public sector tradecraft to all that work in and with the public service.

The growing unresponsiveness of banks and public institutions to the need to talk to a real person is now a matter of importance to the growing fraction of the population in the older age groups. When default online services don't adequately serve a person, they find it to navigate complexity and the whole process can cost several hours to get a person who (might) be able to help. The growing distance between service providers and the end user (aka customer – or as we should correctly designate them, citizen) is accelerated by two trends: the growing distancing and constrained 'assistance' offered by chatbots (Wigan, 2022), and the lack of ethical frameworks for both management roles and IT execution. Both need attention to support service improvement, costs reduction and to address an impersonal experience for what is often the most personal of matters people are dealing with (emergencies, social support, health challenges, taxation).

Some departments have dramatically improved their quality of public-facing digital services which has been extremely beneficial for the bulk of society, but in doing so have made it harder to engage with non-digital service delivery, reinforcing a digital divide of equity and access.

The context deficit is not just about service delivery, it is also cultural and demographic. The Australian public sector necessarily must reflect and serve the wide and diverse needs of our entire community. Closing the context deficit means engaging with that diversity in all forms, from historical, to cultural, (dis)ability, location, age, socioeconomic, religion and (dis)advantage. Public servants should also understand the deep context of Indigenous communities, not just the impacts since colonisation, but how we can engage with and learn the lessons of tens of millennia in Indigenous knowledge systems.

An institutional memory deficit: the impact of an expertise exodus

One of the authors was doing a master's degree at Monash in the mid '90s that was suddenly swamped by a wave of quite brilliant technical people, experts in their areas, externalised (usually fired) by Shell. Their technical skills were no longer valued as the company undertook a strategic outsourcing approach where expertise "could always be hired

on short term when needed”. In practice most of these experts went overseas, and others changed fields to ones not dependent on fossil fuels. Highly skilled people were not somehow magically “available on demand” after leaving Shell, which itself in the process of rapidly commoditising expertise, lost its own institutional memory.

Unsurprisingly, this pattern initially appeared effective in the private sector, the same as in the public sector, as short-term savings were made by senior staff who had passed through the technically competent culture stages in their earlier careers. But as the next generation arrived without this experience and with declining access to institutional history, the systemic loss of technical expertise and skills spread widely. This created a marked shift in the attitudes towards ‘specialists’ as being readily externalised and engaged only as required. With further generations of managers, acculturated with the privatisation and generalist management orientation, the priorities and ability to retain judgment capacities in technical (or indeed any) area have become atrophied. Under such pressures, organisations increasingly became experts only at procurement and contract management, eventually becoming incapable of understanding or delivering their core purpose or value.

Incremental mechanisms have also played an increasing role. The x% “efficiency dividends” mandated have, of course, led to personal pruning to fit the culture as to what necessary expertise is perceived to be. As long as managerial perceptions matched the overall environment of the public narrative – that big government was bad government – and every opportunity to divest core responsibilities and expertise to the private sector was taken. The Gershon Review (2008) recommended an efficiency dividend with the promise of a proportion being reinvested in public sector capability and innovation and a coherent IT policy. This could have been a turning point for the APS, but the Labor government of the day decided to simply return the savings to the budget bottom line, creating an immediate escalation of protectionism and competitive siloed behaviour across portfolios. It is now arguable that efficiency dividends no longer play a constructive role and has only resulted in departments squeezing rather than transforming their operations (Black, J. 2023). This does not mean that efficiency isn’t important, but rather that a narrative of small government rather than right-

sized government has led to short term cost reductions with long term cost increases, combined with less effective, less connected and less responsive government. It is difficult not to find public sector units now overwhelmed with what they are expected to do, as experience, expertise, and strategy based on knowledge has drained away.

This begs a basic question: what is the public service for?

Implementation of the thoughts and capacities of short-term occupants of the ministerial seats? Or, as the Public Service Act states, to uphold constitutional and legislative mandates, with some direct responsibility to the government, but also to the Parliament and the community at large? If the latter is given weight, and it remains to be argued just how much, then the culture will need to change, the recruitment with it, and the expectations of policy participation be reignited.

The debate in recent years has been more focused on bigger or smaller government, rather than a public sector capable of delivering its core accountabilities. To be fair, public institutions could have done more to reimagine how to achieve their purpose and mission in modern ways and have often simply asked for more resources to do more of the same, so there has been a vacuum in genuine exploration of what a right-sized public sector could look like. This challenge is global in nature:

“For several years now, this town has been consumed by a rancorous argument over the proper size of the federal government. It’s an important debate one that dates back to our very founding. But when that debate prevents us from carrying out even the most basic functions of our democracy when our differences shut down government or threaten the full faith and credit of the United States then we are not doing right by the American people.”

**– PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA,
2014 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS**

Ideally, a clear articulation of the purpose, role and responsibilities of a public sector would inform the sizing, capabilities and core competencies of government, which is often defined in the

constitutional framework of that jurisdiction. But the recent ideological orientation to treat all aspects of government as contestable created a pressure for short term savings at the cost of properly and sustainably ran public administration. The competence of governments has increasingly been undermined by the issue of everything in government being assumed to be contestable, including the expertise, functions and purpose of government. This has been used as a weapon to dismantle government, where a misalignment of public sector purpose leads to a misapplication of expertise, and where expertise is not used to inform the strategic direction or transformation of public institutions to meet new challenges or opportunities.

The perennial debates about centralisation and decentralisation have led to a situation where even within Canberra, the divisions and segmented responsibilities leave wider and wider gaps in accountability and delivery that are not being filled. This is over and above the inevitable tensions between Departments for structural and political reasons.

The physical centripetal forces to the centre of power have also had the usual effect of steadily reducing the interactions between public servants and the professional and public communities. The natural effect of a larger fraction of empowered specialists in the public sector would bring greater engagement to diverse expertise and experience across the community, and with communities of expertise due to professionals tending to maintain wide and deep connections in their disciplines. When there were more active and empowered branches of Commonwealth departments in other cities, greater connections between public servants and communities were a natural outcome from social interactions.

It is ironic that while the COVID-19 pandemic made virtual and hybrid meetings a routine, the speed with which solely in-person meetings have been encouraged or enforced at the time of writing was wasting the gains made. This very positive and non-spatially limited openness had just begun to become effective, but it appears that public institutions are returning to a pre-internet and closed doors approach. The motives for this are not solely a reflection of the communities wish to pretend that 'Covid is over', when for large sections of the community it is still not at the time of writing, and the lethality of infections is still very high (outside the younger age groups).

An increased openness to access had begun to become consolidated, making potential and actual participation across a continental – and indeed a global stage straightforward and removing a very real historically developed constraint.. This reversal has also already been taken up by the law and professional societies before the cultural expectations of wider access and engagement could be consolidated. We may soon regret this in any restructure of the public service that may develop in the future. The near universal closure of public service buildings to “security” combined with the deletion of Zoom/Teams/etc communications has drawn up the drawbridge to the public service in no uncertain terms and presents major barriers to those members of the community attempting to get through the barriers presented by inadequate IT interfaces. The apparent inability of public services to respond to even simple questions simply reinforces the inhumanity of the face presented to the population.

There is something ironic about the rise of “net happiness” and wellbeing agendas, which are becoming increasingly widespread in public commentaries and political platforms, which currently have to co-exist with well established “efficiency agendas” that constrain public sectors to systemically value monetary success above community outcomes. It is only when policy and wellbeing measures translate into success metrics, policy modelling, prioritisation, program planning and budget processes that we could start to see purpose and impact systemically supported.

The history has led us to a place that needs change in several areas, and in many cases simply a return to previous goals and perceived tasks that have fallen into abeyance under the New Public Management (NPM). The cultural determination of the NPM has made such change difficult to initiate and left the public service both short of the kind of leadership and expertise that is needed, and also culturally and systemically unable to see the necessity of having expertise. A diabolical, self-reinforcing and downward spiral of public sector capability is the result of developments over recent decades.

Service delivery excellence in the modern world, characterised as a digital, mobile and polycrisis era, requires a great deal more flexibility, continuous change and user-centred design than is easily managed

through a contractual relationship with a vendor. It also needs better communication with the substantial expertise outside the service.

The progressive outsourcing of the design and delivery of both services and policy has proven to be a serious problem: ethically, financially, and now politically. This can be changed and is perhaps the first positive step that can be taken.

Instead of regarding the migration of senior public servants and politicians to large commercial and lobbying bodies, how could we make this work positively?

It is not impossible. For example, the UK civil service has previously brought in a senior industrial person for a period at a senior level and set expectations that achieved highly effective outcomes. One random example illustrates this. The Sole Aviation Underwriter at Lloyds was brought in at an executive level to regulate his own industry from within the British civil service. This led to at least one insurer being disbarred and some highly effective regulations being constructed.

The latter outcome sadly did not have the endorsement more widely in the service to be carried through to full political implementation, but this does not invalidate such a model— simply emphasises that better use and transparency of such inputs can make a material difference, instead of the exact reverse of this process currently seen in moves from public service into major private lobbying or consulting bodies.

This type of model has similarities to some of the US models which mix political appointments at a senior level to enhance the connections in the opposite direction. Neither model is perfect, but greater use of both offers routes to improve both communications and effectiveness in policy development and testing, and a way of getting scarce skills into close connection with organisational structures in both directions. Albeit the goals and motivations are (hopefully) different in government and private sectors, but allowing either to take over the whole underlying structures has proved unproductive. So, such changes in structure — and expectations — offer an early route to improvements as long as transparency, accountability, and effectiveness are all part of the necessary organisational changes and expectations.

A policy deficit: increasingly insular and self-perpetuating views

The definition of “policy” has been narrowed and narrowed in the public sector, to the point where many who are defined as policy experts are only responsible for “big P” policy, which is the casual term for advice and new policy options provided to the government of the day. Unfortunately, policy in practice has been largely reframed in Australia as simply translation the will of a minister into prose, with suitable supportive evidence (creating the phrasing “policy-based evidence” as a darkly humorous contrast to evidence-based policy).

Many policy professionals taught in recent years have also been encouraged to explicitly stay at arm’s length from domain expertise, and to ensure they “consult” from a position of generalism. This has perpetuated both the issue of policy making becoming increasingly a creative writing exercise (rather than robust, evidence-based, collaborative or purposeful), and has also set up policy teams to be less effective at designing or driving policy outcomes or interventions. Policy experts are taught to consider many views and ideas and largely to coalesce all inputs into a middle of the road policy output that attempts to reflect all views. Policy teams are not really taught how to take a test-driven approach or to genuinely and collaboratively work with diverse and conflicting perspectives to reach the best possible policy outcome and public impact. The marginalisation of genuine domain expertise has also created an extreme difficulty for experts to contribute to public policy, from any sector.

Today many accomplished or senior ex-public servants have chosen to capitalise on their expertise, achievements and networks after they leave the public sector in other domains of work, but how can those with genuine and relevant expertise be differentiated from those without much to contribute, unless there is sufficient internal expertise to critically assess and interpret such contributions? There are plenty of ex public servant leaders who have used the relative freedom of not being a public servant to justify their actions and views, even if those actions or views have been wrong or problematic.

Conversely, [Stephen Duckett](#) in health and [Hugh White](#) in defence are good examples of the sorts of positive and high-quality contributions that can continue to be drawn upon in their retirements. Duckett, an ex-head of a Canadian health department, is an energetic member of the Grattan policy team making regular policy proposals or commentaries. White is another ex-senior academic in defence who continues to write highly informed and constructive political commentary and proposals on Australian defence issues. Both demonstrate that highly experienced and senior public servants can make very substantial contributions to policy development from their long and highly respected experience if they choose, rather than retiring to become very highly paid lobbyists or ‘consultants’ parlaying their networks and access for personal gain. They are examples of the types of expertise lost if older persons are not actively included and engaged in policy and development processes well into the “older” age groups as long as their energy and motivation remain (both of which are clearly quite variable).

Many domain experts have found refuge in ‘think tanks’ to assemble a sufficient momentum to get a hearing. There has been a trend for some think tanks to be fronts for a particular political agenda. Two examples are the Tasman Institute was an early 1990s hard right economic enterprise led by Michael Porter, growing to include ACIL and Allen Consulting and especially playing a major role in the Kennett conservative government in Victoria, coinciding with the “steering not rowing” agenda; the Centre for Independent Studies was founded in 1976 and focussed predominantly on right wing politics. The Australia Institute and Per Capita lean towards left wing issues. Others, such as Grattan, make special efforts towards genuine domain expertise and policy proposals, and host major parties who have already had distinguished public service careers.

The efforts to secure government ‘independent’ technical advisory bodies (aka Infrastructure Australia, Infrastructure Victoria) swiftly become politicised on way or another, and fake consultation (aka community engagement) replaces genuine broader community input and engagements on a peer basis. Infrastructure Victoria has had clear agendas that were driven through consultations on EVs in which one of our authors participated. Despite repeated efforts, Infrastructure

Victoria refused to include a broader range of EVs than cars. Needless to say, the respect and willingness to engage — let alone trust — faded to near zero for all the participants. Such ham-fisted but all too common approaches do not help anyone, and certainly not the community.

In recent years, politicisation spread to ‘independent’ bodies (such as the AAT) and destroyed their credibility. The current federal government is making a concerted effort to reestablish oversight functions as respected institutes instead of being dominated by political appointments and special interests where their favoured people can be put out to lucrative pasture on the public ticket. This has been an evident practice in successive governments for some time now, creating significant challenges to reinstitute behavioural patterns of genuine independence and evidence-driven programs and policy.

Balance is not found or maintained by having all players on one side of the scales. A sustainable approach to independence in policy advice requires some tension and engagement between internal and external expertise, including external organisations set up to secure some of the independent expert-based judgment and to grow and maintain some of public trust.

Another effect of the skills losses within public service is the increasing inability to respond to technical questions from the public, where non-responses stretch out to years for comparatively simple queries. For example, the Victorian North East Link Auditing for a \$24 billion project only allowed published reports to be used, with no public access to the models, assumptions, parameters etc on which these were supposedly based. Overuse of the ‘commercial in confidence’ tag simply due to not having the expertise to debate or justify the underpinning has become a common political avoidance of accountability. At one time, the UK required a public enquiry exposing all the analysis that has been done for major road and transport projects. The NE Link example is the largest infrastructure project in Victoria, and it would be hard to claim that it was founded on a solid and agreed foundation.

A further worrying development is the common refusal of the public service to respond to expert queries from the public. One of the authors can (sadly) supply examples that appear to show levels of expertise

within the Victorian public service have dropped to a level where an 80+ year old with a range of specialist knowledge is ignored rather than engaged at the most trivial level. When this occurs, one needs little to justify both an improvement in public service skills, and the (far cheaper) active engagement of such members of the public.

A sustainability deficit: increasing focus on efficiency at the cost of longevity

Public institutions exist to support public good and quality of life, so there should never be a stronger imperative in public institutions than ensuring individuals and communities get the support and services they are eligible for and entitled to. Yet, we often see short term pressures (like reduced or reprioritised budgets, failing IT systems or the latest ministerial priority) drive a lot of reactive behaviours and short-term planning in the public sector. It is critical that the public sector always take the long view and plan resources accordingly.

Modern government is complex in any dimension, be it scale, number of services or processes followed. As the public sector seeks to embrace tools like AI to deliver outcomes and greater value to taxpayers, it is important to understand how these technologies interact with laws and institutions. In this respect, Australia would be better served by an informed democracy than it would be by just data driven governance. In aiming for an informed and participatory democracy, the explainability and transparency of a decision is a key building block.

The concept of public infrastructure as it relates to public health, public education and public transport is fairly well understood, but where is the public digital infrastructure that our communities and various sectors should be able to rely upon and trust? When any new systems are built or bought, why wouldn't potential public reuse be included in the design and delivery? This kind of sustainable decision making would greatly improve the reuse of technical capabilities across the system and could create new value to the general public. For instance, where is the publicly available reference implementation of machine-readable legislation and regulation for ease of service delivery, compliance and public scrutiny? Or the list of all public services with the respective

eligibility and calculation information? Or the proactive public modelling tools to understand the impact of change or emergencies? Where is the publicly accessible record of key decisions and actions taken, with traceability to their legal or policy authority? There is so much confidence the public sector could inspire by simply working more transparently. To be fair, much of the opaqueness of governance is a matter of habit and inherited practices, but the lack of genuine systemic transformation has led us to a point where the public sector is now several steps behind the society and economy it purports to serve.

As the feedback loops and policy/program making in the public sector became increasingly insular and constrained, and as the urgency of short-term projects and investment to address short term problems/opportunities became loudest and most pressing, sustainable decision making has taken a back seat, considered a future problem to deal with when future funding is identified. The simple truth is that if every dollar spent was done so with longevity in mind, we would naturally have more sustainable systems, programs, policies and infrastructure, but with short termism baked into most prioritisation frameworks, a sustainability deficit has emerged.,

A regulatory deficit: increasingly ineffective and mis-incentivised systems

As public sectors and public servants focused more on efficiencies and streamlining than on impactfulness and outcomes, key responsibilities of government like market regulation began to lose their way.

In a business sense, the philosophy underpinning regulatory reform largely shifted to a principles-based approach as a means of reducing cost and providing flexibility for implementation in businesses. And yet, more interpretation requires more effort and creates less consistency of application, so the cost and complexity simply shifted from policy teams into the consumers of regulation making it much more costly for the regulated sectors, particularly for small and medium enterprises – and individuals. The emergent – and growing – gap between policy and implementation also made it much harder to understand or realise the original policy intent, with pressures to reduce costs at a business unit

level often creating an impediment to collaboration across teams in the public and private sectors, and certainly gets in the way of actually solving problems or driving outcomes and makes resolution of problems encountered by individuals intractable. Treating the act of regulation itself as a business, productivity or efficiency measure can create a range of perverse incentives because there are many imperatives for regulation, not just economic ones. If you measure success in regulation by how many compliance breaches you have identified, the organisation might become systemically and perversely incentivised to not strengthen the regulated system, because a strengthened regulatory system might have less breaches.

It is often forgotten that the purpose of most regulation is to allow systems to work in the manner the policy intended – but as so many aspects of government policy become complex and difficult to respond to at the individual level, the sheer lack of navigators to work through the complexities successfully frames the government as uncaring and distant. The net effect – no longer limited solely to individuals at the end of the chain – is to make every interaction with government a painful drawn-out process where a whole morning on the telephone seems to be necessary to get anything resolved. It is unreasonable to limit this comment to government as many large-scale corporate bodies have come to behave in the same manner.

Identifying, measuring and monitoring, and continuously optimising for regulatory success, as defined by the intended impact and outcomes of the regulatory framework, is a necessary means to balance any systemic perverse incentives, but this regulatory north star is often missing in modern regulatory programs. Government has largely shifted to a mode of only telling people when they get things wrong but not providing easy mechanisms or support to get things right. Regulators are so focused on how to best target the highest risk areas in their regulatory regime, that they lose sight of an increasing proportion of the regulated domain. Some regulators are lucky to actively be managing and assuring less than 5% of their domain, creating a potential 95% playground for things to go wrong and a regulatory deficit in the economy writ large.

A values deficit: the structural perversion of NPM & politicisation

Whilst individual public servants may have maintained their professional values in the face of mounting pressures, at a structural level, public sector values are largely not embedded into prioritisation, budget or resourcing decision-making frameworks. The pressure to prioritise urgency, efficiency and political priorities has been increasingly at the cost of mission/purpose, public outcomes and public sector values.

While we continue to measure success in purely business/economic terms (efficiencies, savings, economic outcomes, etc) and delivery terms (launched, ‘customer’ metrics, completion rates, etc), then the structural incentives will continue to be New Public Management at their heart. Private sector organisations aren’t systemically driven by national challenges, public purpose or policy outcomes, so to mimic business structures and languages is to ignore the special context and responsibilities of the public sector. How public institutions are managed needs to reflect that special context, responsibility and accountability of the public sector. Prioritisation of funding will continue to be driven by economic imperatives, and ‘value’ to the public will be limited to economic or individual benefits at best. But public sectors also need to provide other forms of value. Social cohesion, national security, stability and predictability, standards, a social safety net, etc. When measured purely economically or on delivery measures, we miss the forest (society) for the trees (individuals and budgets).

Actively choosing to shift from a “New Public Management” mindset to a public value or mission mindset could help create a culture and methodology for departments to be better public institutions that are systemically motivated by public good.

For instance, a detailed and pragmatic 2017 paper called “Public Value Management Theory” by the Chartered Institute of Purchase and Supply provides a reasonable repeatable blueprint for applying a public values mindset to public service, one that defines public values as economic, social/cultural, political and ecological. The key elements of PVM as they apply to the public sector (in particular to procurement) appear to usefully apply across more broadly:

- The three elements of the strategic triangle are in place. These are: strategic goals and values; the authorising environment (eg gaining legitimacy to undertake specific projects); and operational capability (eg resources and skills etc)
- The emphasis on societal rather than individual needs with two dimensions of public value being “What do the public most value?” and “What adds value to the public sphere?” (Benington, 2011). This means that public bodies in addition to providing good quality services to individuals, have a duty to provide broader benefits to the local community as a whole, with such benefits being measurable
- The role of public managers as “explorers” and creators of public value by looking outward, upward, downward and inward, as coordinators of the three elements of the strategic triangle and with an emphasis on political management skills
- The emphasis on networked governance with public bodies working and leading across organisational boundaries including within a “mixed economy” network of public, private and third sector providers
- Co-production is core to the creation of public value with public organisations and their providers working with the public and clients in both designing and delivering services.” — Public Value Management Theory 2017, Alan Turrell (CIPS).

It is possible to interpret Public Value Management substantially more narrowly, where ‘value’ is simply used as a euphemism for “business benefits”, and not reflective either of broader societal value or the values of the people served, which runs the risk of repeating the issues of New Public Management with shiny new frameworks.

Many commentators have long been calling for public sectors to re-establish a more mission/values-driven systemic approach, one that continuously explores, collaborates with the public and coordinates across portfolios around shared policy objectives, from the 2009 Australian Gov 2.0 Taskforce (Gruen et al, 2009) to the shift recently

of economists like Mariana Mazzucato calling for a “mission-based economy” (Mazzucato, 2022). It is clear there is a strong public demand and expectation for a values-driven public sector, so embedding values into the structures, incentives, culture and strategies of public institutions is key to ensuring a sustained and effective approach to a values-led public sector.

Finally, disclosure of issues in the public interest has attracted severe penalties for several notable cases in Australia, yet given the sometimes neglect of Public Institutions to give proper weight to the public interest, public disclosure mechanisms will always be necessary to maintain pressure and integrity in a system. It is critical that public interest and impacts are always a key part of decision making by public servants at all levels so as to ensure the maintenance of actively serving the government, the Parliament and the people, rather than considering public disclosure as simply “behaving badly” by embarrassing ministers and governments. Given a serious weight to the duty of the civil service to the community as well as the government, first such actions would be far less likely not to be done internally, but also those who acted as whistleblowers in the public interest would receive valorisation instead of vilification. A second order effect could well be a shift towards supporting whistleblowers in the large-scale private sector. The latter is not straightforward, as professional ethics of societies can so easily slip back into protection solely of employers: the same cultural reflex against exposure by the political processes that civil servants are responsible to (but it must be repeatedly stated, not solely).

An engagement deficit: the rise of labelled experts at the cost of broad engagement

The distinction between experts and expertise might appear to be trivial, but it is not. If expertise is demonstrated capacity to make well founded decisions and to act with special and appropriate knowledge, this might or might not be a characteristic of a person with a designated label ‘expert’, which itself might be based on a qualification of purely historical value but excellent signalling capacity. This particular perspective is founded in a risk management mindset rather than one focused on achieving the optimal outcome.

In any case, as the gap grew between decision makers and expertise in public institutions, public institutions were faced with the genuine challenge of firstly distinguishing suitable “experts”, and of engaging other forms of expertise (including experience) which became systemically incomprehensible to engagement mechanisms run by media, communications and generalist staff.

When exchanges with the public service are required, there is always a risk that ‘labelled’ experts will be used rather than those with demonstrated expertise, as the risk levels of an error are perceived to be lower and offsetting responsibilities easier to ensure. If a particular person or persons cannot be reliably labelled as an ‘expert’, however high their levels of performed expertise, it can be minimised. When there is low internal expertise or when risk management is the preferred stance, then the most clearly labelled ‘experts’ will be preferred. One version of such a framing is a reliance on the reputations of the Big 4 accounting firms: a modern version of the early IT dictum “no one ever got fired for choosing IBM” – for exactly the same reasons.

This pattern is visible when public servants hire big and established companies to provide expertise, presuming the expertise provided will be befitting the reputation of the company, but as the internal expertise deficit grew in public institutions, it became increasingly difficult to identify genuine expertise, and the same companies found they could increase profits by using increasingly junior staff to provide professional looking but cookie-cutter, templated and repeatable “expertise” to their public sector customers, often learning new insights from junior public servants which could be monetised and sold to their senior leaders and indeed to other organisations.

When the mindset is “what is the lowest risk action that delivers on what we’ve been directed?” or “How can we best deliver on the direction we’ve been given?”, then the buy-in of influential groups and individuals will be the dominant decision framework, and experts and expertise are diminished in their impact, as actual skills are reduced to being seen as tools for ensuring buy-in and delivery. Contrary expertise or evidence to the direction can be framed as a risk to delivery, rather than the more helpful approach that such expertise provides the opportunity to improve the outcome or change direction where the

trajectory is clearly not viable. In this scenario, management approaches tend to lean towards the valuation and utilisation of expertise and of experts as simply tools to use (or not use) as is convenient. Experts and expertise are systematically undermined when departments only aim to do what they are told.

Conversely, when the mindset is framed around “what is the best policy outcome and public value?”, then there is a natural inclination to draw on experience and expertise from anyone who has something useful to contribute, including those affected by a policy.

In short, experts and expertise are best utilised when the public sector takes a genuinely purpose and outcomes-based approach, with independently evidence-based and participatory approach to public governance. There is an understood benefit and value in engaging expertise and genuine experts when public institutions own and drive an outcome, not just to ensure the best informed and evidence-based approach, but to engage community support in the policies and programs delivered.

This raises another question: what kinds of backgrounds do senior management value, what types of demonstrated expertise, and who do they in turn genuinely regard as experts? Immediately any onlooker will ask: how do they judge the expertise of the chosen parties, and is it based solely on networks and on qualification-branded experts? How would they meaningfully engage and value the expertise of non-labelled “experts”, including engaging with the experience, needs and values of the public?

In many areas technical and assessable expertise are rarely available at management levels, and indeed generalist skills are regarded as the most desirable. It is interesting to note that the top echelons of China are dominated by formally well qualified and experienced engineers of one speciality or another. Legal, policy or management qualifications and experience are far more valued and common in senior echelons of western public sectors.

The cultural frameworks of law and management are rarely aligned to understand those of professions and disciplines that use quite different performance criteria, and so much is missed. Most professional bodies

have formal ethical standards, but it is difficult to find a managerial ethical standard of the same rigour – apart from fiducial responsibility, which would in other areas of expertise be regarded as a small component of an ethical framework.

In these small-scale perspectives, the most significant omission is the expertise in the community outside the public service and the parties genuinely involved in policy formation. Decades ago this was not significant, but with the rapid rise in the level of education in the broader community, most areas of specialist – and indeed generalist – expertise have become more or less contestable.

This included the developed and tested expertise as well as the growth of formally qualified experts. While the response to this might have been codesign, on the basic grounds of taking advantage of the much larger skills base, such an approach might be regarded as enabling a greater degree of contestability (aka changes in what might otherwise have been chosen). The really difficult questions have now become much more common. Individuals increasingly demand agency and genuine roles in decision making as individuals, and not necessarily for any special skills that they might have. Inevitably this is a power issue and further confuses the roles of experts and the establishment of genuine expertise on the issues in question. There are few ways of managing these increasingly complex situations with ever clearer governance and accountability processes, and, even more important, commitments to monitoring and modifying the impacts and outcomes of policies once determined.

An academic deficit: the impact on academic engagement and intellectual rigour

A similar but far from identical situation where trust and expertise are casually dismissed for expediency is in the operations of the Australian Research Council ([ARC](#)) assessing research grants. The peer review task of fairly and thoroughly assessing often extremely specialised proposals written by both highly regarded people and new entrants is a very demanding and time-consuming task where expertise is central.

The irony is that basic research has been shown time after time in studies over many decades to have higher rates of return than second guessing applied research! (e.g., Rosenberg, 1990, Scheiderman, 2016). Admittedly the implied discount rate used for such assessments needs to be considered fairly to get this result as the time horizons are different to basic and applied research. It is the basic research that is so hard for non-specialists to assess. Changes in assessment frameworks to emphasise 'job ready' and other short-term goals implicitly raises the appropriate public sector discount rates to be used [ref-Baumol and Feldstein]- and de-emphasises longer term benefits. This is a political decision to do this, but arguably inappropriate if too widely used.

The very recent efforts to form an independent ARC review committee has resulted in a very top-heavy group of "safe" appointees. A more thorough review before selecting these 'safe' individuals might have looked at areas where change has been very rapid, for example, set up a changing selection of individuals to match proposals arriving, instead of a group of famous people on a stable base. A more dynamic structure to address areas where change is rapid and closer connections would be beneficial would have been a possible creative alternative.

Another area where trust and expertise assessment factors are critical is when multiple disciplines are involved, and this mix of expertise required to do assessment becomes a lot harder. Again, coincidentally this author used to get mostly these types of proposals to assess. Taking stock at this point the close links between trust and the use made of expertise has to be added to the capacity to judge if a person or item actually has the desired or necessary expertise in the first place.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in public service a significantly larger range of experts need to be on staff and not externalised.

This diversion into university problems is because universities used to be the trusted and independent go to bodies for independent policy advice, analysis and investigations. The commercial pressures politically pressed on them have now made this questionable, and reliant to a large degree on the individual professors taking the name lead on any such work, creating a vacuum which has been enthusiastically filled by

consulting companies, who now go so far as to even sell “hypothesis-led research” to public institutions, without the independent veracity of genuinely independent researchers.

This confluence of mechanisms also applies to the broader community, although there it is more a question of ageism and the general low standard of real consultation of the community when the community is more expert than the local government. The lack of trust (or even knowledge of) community skills in local government contributes to the lack of trust in local government itself.

The broader issues of genuine codesign offer a real opportunity to cut costs and enhance results as well as trust and credibility, if handled well. Currently there is little sign of this. Even the question is not taken seriously, so any creative trust building processes are far in the future – unless change can be induced.

The questions must be asked: how long will the personal credibility and trust in the expertise and its utilisation last if current corporate behaviours continue to rule universities? Even in the core function of teaching, pressures are observed to pass full fee-paying students not meeting the required standards due to the fiscal dependence on universities on these cash flows– and the cross funding of research from these funds as well. The marketing is dependent on international ratings– and these lean heavily on research. Not a healthy mixture – but the community just in academics is still holding up – for now. Were the universities to start to use their own staff to do their own reviews instead of using external consultants where the conflicted values have become all too apparent, this would contribute strongly to trust in the universities (internally as well as externally) hold up longer.

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