

The Public Service

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN
THE PUBLIC SERVICE
PRIME MINISTER&CABINET

A cornerstone of good governance must be that the public service is independent of politicians. The public service must serve the public, not the Government's political interest. Historically and ideally, public servants provided frank and honest advice to ministers, even if it was politically inconvenient. The powers of the political Executive must be separate from an independent bureaucracy tasked with implementing government policy and administering government programs. Like the judiciary, the public service must be kept free from politicisation and partisanship. Since the 1980s, and increasingly under the Howard Coalition government, these central tenets have been eroded, particularly for senior officials. The Democrats want public sector independence restored.

"...the institution that is the public service plays a key role in our parliamentary democracy by ensuring apolitical and impartial administration of public programs, and disinterested advice to government. A degree of independence in the public service is important."

Mr Andrew Podger
Former Public Service
Commissioner, 2002-04.

Our Action Plan

- To campaign for secure tenure for senior public officials, with appointments made on merit, and remunerated by an independent tribunal, to avoid politicisation;
- Continue our activism for governing legislation that emphasises the independence of the public sector, and provides strong mechanisms for the disclosure and reduction of waste, incompetence or corruption.

Issue One: Politicisation of the public service

The Democrats have a long and proud record of support for a vibrant modern skilled independent and ethical public sector, imbued with the values necessary to serve Australia's public and national interest well.

Since the early 1980s, both major parties have introduced measures to improve the responsiveness of public administration to the government of the day. Some of these were necessary reforms to improve decision-making and management, and to initiate a more energetic responsive and effective bureaucracy. Other changes were designed to enhance political control. These included:

- changing the matters that affect independence – the methods of appointment, less secure tenure through the introduction of term contracts, making remuneration more subjective through performance pay for secretaries and other agency heads;
- using political and partisan ministerial advisers for oversight and liaison purposes;



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- strengthening ministerial authority over departmental administration;
- reducing the influence of public service commissioners in oversight and in appointing or terminating departmental secretaries and other agency heads.

To minimise any further politicisation of the public service, the Democrats are of the view that reform is required to ensure that the interests of the community and public are protected.

Issue Two: What is to be done?

- Defend the independence of the public service by providing secure tenure for senior public officials, with appointments made on merit, and remunerated by an independent tribunal, to avoid politicisation;
- Restore the doctrine of frank and fearless advice;
- Support the non-politicisation of the public service through the open advertising of PS vacancies followed by a merit selection process and the terms of conditions of any appointments being open to public scrutiny;
- Increase the capacity of the parliament to hold the bureaucracy (and contractors) and the ministry accountable through better resourcing, and through better systems for audit and disclosure, including enhanced freedom of information processes;
- Ensure impact statements as appropriate, for instance for policies affecting Australians in regional areas, in low-income families, in small business and where society and the environment are concerned;
- Oppose 'contracting out' essential government services where this will lead to less accountability, higher costs to the public, or lower standards and access;
- Scrutinise any moves toward outsourcing that would compromise the integrity and independence of the public service. Outsourcing should not apply to final policy formulation and advice, decision making with respect to the allocation of government assistance, the maintenance of record keeping, or IT systems where privacy/security is an issue;
- Support the role of a strong Australian Industrial Relations Commission and Public Service Commission to provide a strong arbiter on disputes between public servants and their government employer;
- Support strong public disclosure (whistleblower) law for the public service;
- Support stronger powers and better resources for the Auditor-General and other regulators to identify and address corruption waste and inefficiency;
- Support allowing public servants to stand for public office, calling for a referendum to amend Section 44(iv) of the Constitution.



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