

APPOINTING CEO'S AFTER A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT - LESSONS FROM THE PAST

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I have pretensions to grandeur only as head of a local think tank, the TJRyan Foundation (<http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au>). I am not – as described in the columns of *The Mandarin* today – 'a long-time Queensland public servant' (just four years as a Director General, from after the start of the Goss era to just before the end).

However, from various ivory towers, I have been a keen observer of the public sector since the late 1970's and of every change of government since 1989. I also have many friends, relatives and former students among public servants then and now. I was also director of an oral history project at the University of Queensland called '[Queensland Speaks](#)' where a team of interviewers talked to former Ministers and Directors-General and specifically discussed the topic of changes of government.

My general response to current events is that we need to be patient with a leadership team somewhat surprised at the rapidity of its success, then distracted by unexpected natural disasters, but one which has good intentions and laudable caution. It seems churlish in the circumstances to complain, as the Opposition Leader has, about the need to act instantly rather than prolong uncertainty: advocating a night of long knives rather than a week of short blades.

It has been very much worse in the past, particularly under the Goss-Rudd regime when large numbers of senior public servants were rusticated to a vacant state school on the edge of the city, promptly dubbed the Gulag. The terms of their 'permanency' made their new employer hope that this demeaning treatment would encourage them to leave voluntarily rather than expect employment elsewhere in the system.

By contrast, the numbers under discussion now are tiny, and we do not know – and may never know – whether the formal exchanges of letters conceals a desire on the part of any of the individuals concerned to seek more congenial employment elsewhere after receiving suitable financial compensation. It is a matter of preference on both sides of the optimal team – clearly major changes in policy orientation or public endorsement offered by public servants to their previous political masters enters into this equation. (In my own case, I was happy enough to receive the daunting formality of a dismissal letter and compensation rather than resign voluntarily over differences with central agencies over policy and management style).

Under the regime changes of the Borbidge and Beattie governments, the lessons had been learnt that many public servants who had been eager to embrace change under Goss had been denied the benefit of the doubt after serving for so long under the Bjelke-Petersen government (and the air of corruption which pervaded it). This disappointment comes out strongly in our oral history interviews.

Under both Borbidge and Beattie, there were examples of continuity – for example, my successor as Director-General of Education continued to serve under Goss, Borbidge and then Beattie, albeit with different duties. However the key standard-bearers of the ideological changes associated with the LNP and ALP were moved, or in some cases, moved back again.

It would seem perfectly appropriate in an era where the Westminster model has been so modified for this to happen under Palaszczuk. There is enough on the public record to suggest that some public servants were recruited by the LNP government with a specific partisan purpose in mind. They will be challenged in selection processes to demonstrate that they have the flexibility and qualifications as well as the motivation to serve comfortably under new Ministers with a different policy orientation. Others, by contrast, will have the opportunity to rise to this challenge, particularly in the relatively open-minded context of a fluid policy environment.

The biggest change – even since Borbidge and Beattie – is that the career paths of senior executives is much wider and more flexible, so that public service security is less valued. On both sides of the political divide, there are opportunities either in other jurisdictions – as seen by the incoming Director-General of the Premier's Department – or in the private sector. This applies all the way down though the senior ranks but it is particularly relevant at the top. Change of government does not mean the end of the world for a Director-General but rather the moment of choice. In making that choice, a complex mix of considerations interact on both sides.