

## RESEARCH REPORT 16: THE WISDOM OF 'THE WATCHER': LEST WE FORGET

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I spent nearly 20 years in the Queensland public service, years that spanned the end of the Bjelike-Petersen era, through the Goss reforms, the Borbidge government, and finally the Beattie government.

When I retired I wrote the biography of my grandfather Ernest Gowers, a prominent 20th century British civil servant. Gowers is best remembered for his book *Plain Words*, originally written just after the second world war at the behest of the British Treasury as an instruction manual for their civil service training courses.

This year marks 150 years since the disaster of the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War. It was the mismanagement of the Crimean War that led the British government to recognise the dangers of nepotism in the public service and institute the 'Northcote Trevelyan' reforms that created an independent civil service exam, and a merit-based Administrative Class, of which Gowers was one.

The public service at the turn of the 20th century was a highly sought after career for the sons of the new professional class, and the cohort that entered the service in the early 20th century served through two world wars, proving themselves highly adaptable. Gowers himself ended his civil service career in charge of London's civil defence through the second world war. This group were later criticised for being elitist and too powerful (later to be lampooned in the BBC program *Yes Minister*), but in the gradual reforms made to the selection system, the 'frank and fearless' baby was thrown out with the cleansing bathwater. Persistent, fashionable derision took hold in the public mind. Often the derision is the result of public servants having to implement government policies. Who loves the tax office? This fashionable scorn has often been damaging to public administration and the running of government.

It is all too easy to dismiss those not on the 'front line' as unnecessary. In my experience the majority of my ex-colleagues worked extremely hard, under a great deal of pressure, and many carried out the administration jobs that now have to fall on those few left on the front line.

Instead of writing of my own experience of the public service, and of the extraordinary waste of institutional memory and expertise that is lost through government purges, I attach here four of the contributions from 'The Watcher', written in the *Brisbane Times* in the latter half of 2012. They not only describe the pressures public servants worked under, the desperation as the Newman government's purge moved through, but also drew attention to the fact that this sort of treatment of the public service makes public servants risk averse, and therefore less likely to provide 'frank and fearless' advice.

I recall making the calculation during the early 1990s about the proportion of the Queensland population on the public sector payroll. These people included police, nurses, teachers, social workers, emergency service workers, many of whom work in the heart of local communities to which they contribute in many other ways. They should be thanked, not punished.

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We may never know who 'The Watcher' was. The column disappeared from the contributions to the *Brisbane Times*. Did 'The Watcher' become one of the victims?

## **1 Public servants more than pen pushers<sup>2</sup>**

### **27 June 2012**

Politicians just love to be photographed with community figures, the local nurse, the policeman, the firefighter or the SES worker. They are figures of community respect.

Public servants, on the other hand, are faceless and generally the subject of public derision. That's a perception politicians and their media minders ruthlessly tap into. They encourage the age old stereotype of the public servant in long socks, shorts and a cardigan with the often unspoken implication that they are lazy pen-pushers who feed from the public trough but who contribute little.

But the reality is that the complex health, transport and criminal justice systems do not operate only with frontline workers. These workers are supported by those who sit at desks, answer phones and keep the records. They are a critical part of the state's infrastructure machinery – without them the systems so relied on, do not operate.

So who are these faceless public servants?

Public servants are the people who provide the thousands of decisions, records, telephone calls and support networks needed to keep the complex structure of modern government operating. They are the ones who work to support the police, the nurses, the firefighters and the ambulance officers.

Public servants are those people who left their own homes and families and worked around the clock during Cyclone Anthony and Cyclone Yasi to help communities get financial relief, shelter and assistance.

Public servants are those who take the details and the records to make sure your child is enrolled in school; they manage the teacher transfers, they make sure there is somewhere for teachers to live in regional and rural Queensland; they clean the schools.

Public servants are those people who operate the administrations desks in public hospitals and make you get to see who you need to see.

Public servants are architects, economists, lawyers, mechanical engineers, town planners, drafting technicians, administration assistants, security officers, speech pathologists, finance officers, managers, electricians, psychologists, environmental officers and hundreds of other professions.

Few wear uniforms. Few are in the public eye – and therefore identified by the politicians as 'frontline'. Fewer still are in demand to be photographed with the local politician, but they are, according to the government's own website, the people who can make a difference.

Public servants are those answering phones, taking details and finding answers for members of the public and who tolerate levels of abuse and rudeness most would not.

Public servants are those who work with out of date technology and data and still try to meet escalating informational demands. They work with technology that would not be tolerated in the private sector.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Public servants more than pen-pushers': <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-politics/public-servants-more-than-faceless-penpushers-20120627-212lf.html>

Public servants work within constraints imposed by a political environment that can be risk averse and at times, more concerned with cheap politics and a headline rather than good public policy.

Public servants are the ones who find the way to dig the minister out of the hole when he or she screws up in the media or in Parliament.

Public service accountability is vastly more demanding than in the private sector where a certain amount of failure is tolerated. The benchmarks accepted for companies are not accepted for public servants.

And don't expect too much support from executive government – they are one of the few employers who would paint workers facing redundancy as being unwanted and unnecessary. Generally, they work the same hours as most in the community. Pay rates are reasonable but nowhere near as good as many claim. Some get overtime, many do not.

Politicians and politician staffers need them to do their thinking for them. Public servants are those who understand that if the minister screws up, then they will cop the blame.

The message from the government on this was clear when, in a spectacular display of political weaseling, a senior public servant was dumped by Arts Minister Ros Bates over a recycled speech. The fact that it went to the minister's staff for approval before going to the minister; the fact that it was a procedural speech that explained legislation that had already been introduced was irrelevant.

A minister feels embarrassed so therefore someone else must be to blame.

The message was not lost on senior levels of the bureaucracy – ministerial responsibility might be the mantra but don't expect it to be exercised.

Public servants work to keep the machinery of state operating. The community perception that bureaucrats are lazy, pen-pushers is no more realistic than the claim that all the talented and clever people work in the private sector.

The reality is that few people can take the heat of the criminal justice system, the child protection system, the transport system or the constant organisational restructures and mergers or the ad hoc demands of the political system.

They are not faceless – they have families, mortgages, ambitions and dreams for their kids. They are part of the local community.

It is something governments would do well to remember.

## **2 Frank and fearless when it suits<sup>3</sup>** **10 July 2012**

Politicians live in a fantasy land. It's a basic part of their professional armour. And part of this is Mr Frank and Mr Fearless – part of the mythology used by politicians to defend bad decisions.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Frank and Fearless when it suits': <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-politics/frank-and-fearless-advice-when-it-suits-20120709-21rhv.html>

When something goes wrong, there is the usual raft of excuses. Usually it goes something like, 'I wasn't fully briefed; I wasn't briefed on that specific issue; the department didn't raise that with me' etc.

Is this starting to sound familiar?

Then, the politicians will tell you there is a longing for an apolitical public service that gives frank and fearless advice.

The implication is that somehow all this has changed. The reality is that frank and fearless advice is still delivered – usually on a daily basis. However, ministers only want frank and fearless advice when it suits. And that is if it delivers a strong and positive headline. (If it delivers anything else, then the conversation is always about who – apart from the minister – is going to handle it and who can we blame.)

Government decisions are not made in a protected policy vacuum; they are made with one eye on the politics of the day, to local members, vested interests and local lobbying and, sometimes, even with the consideration of good public policy.

For instance, there are a large number of small schools scattered throughout suburban Brisbane which, given financial constraints, should be closed. That would be the frank and fearless advice.

The reality is that closing them and the chances of the decision surviving the outrage of local parents and MPs is very low. Every politician loves their local parents and citizens association – none want to be known as the local member who closed their local school.

Government is about votes – not good public policy outcomes. So public servants, based on past experience of the lack of political will on some subjects, find ways to provide reasonable public policy despite political sensitivities.

Obviously, the way advice is provided has changed. The public service does not exist in management isolation; it will continue to change to reflect the way politics is played and public sector management practised.

It doesn't mean the advice has become more politicised or less robust. What it does mean is that there is a massive risk-aversion culture in the public sector that places a higher priority on protecting a minister from tabloid headlines.

This is now more important because it is a sad fact of modern politics that few ministers either have the experience, skills or content knowledge capable of carrying a public argument – as opposed to a few television grabs – that could persuade a community to accept unpopular new policies and outcomes.

And the need to protect the minister has extended to the constant demands of the 24-hour news cycle. Ministers are briefed every day about media implications. It is the first consideration and beware the public servant who fails to recognise the media sensitivity of an issue and does not ensure the warning messages are passed up the line.

Public servants have watched politicians go to extraordinary lengths to avoid negative media and if that means publicly blaming the public service – well far better to blame a group that will not publicly contradict you than to suffer a little political embarrassment.

That tends to breed self-protecting behaviour. They see the influence of media advisers within a ministerial office and note that the major area of interest for the minister is the press release and the press conference.

They also see the media strategies in play – putting up the director-general for bad news press conferences and leave the lovely, glowing ‘positive’ stories for the minister. This strategy was abandoned during the Beattie years on the grounds that the directors-general were becoming better known than the ministers.

Ministers are protected by the fact that no one knows what advice has been given. Certainly the briefing notes are not generally released, except when it suits a political strategy. The advice only becomes an issue when things go wrong. That's when you can see politicians sprint for the umbrella of wriggle words, which brings me back to: ‘I wasn't fully briefed; I wasn't briefed on that specific issue; the department didn't raise that with me’.

The show *Yes, Minister* is still the best primer on the interaction between the public service and executive government and more recently, there is an embarrassing alignment with *Hollowmen*.

The oldest strategy is still in use, that is for the minister to side step the issue and allow the department or agency to take the full force of the blame. After all, who is going to publicly contradict a minister or government? Public servants rarely correct the public record.

Part of the problem with Mr Frank and Mr Fearless is the political illusion. Public servants sit and hear political promises of the support for a frank and fearless public service culture and then see politicians:

- sprinting to blame someone – ‘I didn't write that speech, it was the department's fault’;
- introduce changes to employment to make it easier to sack public servants – security has always been seen as the the protection needed to provide frank and fearless advice and increases their vulnerability to the minister's whim (‘Tell me what I don't want to hear but don't worry – there'll be no splashback’); and
- focus ministerial attention on press releases, media clips and one-page cheat sheets for media conferences and parliamentary question time.

All of which makes it difficult to accept the premise that bad government decisions are the result of a lack of frank and fearless advice from the public sector.

Then there is the ministerial fear of Freedom of Information; Right to Information and 101 other avenues now existing for information to escape – the prospect of this, and how it might be responded to, occupies a great deal of ministerial attention.

The other great myth is the general idea that there has been increased politicisation of the public service.

Concerns about the love of an apolitical public service would carry a great deal more weight if:

- the government didn't appoint a former Liberal MP and one-time Queensland Liberal Party president Michael Caltabiano as one of the first acts to head a major department and push professional public servants to one side;
- you don't appoint the former Opposition Leader's chief of staff David Edwards to head the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation; and
- you don't appoint one of your transition team, Ross Musgrove, to a major position within the Public Service Commission.

Like most work forces, public servants watch the rhetoric and the actions. When they see the direct contradiction between the act and the statement they know they are simply dealing with another bunch of politicians.

### **3 Drip becomes a flood<sup>4</sup>** **1 August 2012**

It started as sackings by drip. Yesterday, it became clear it would be sackings by flood. Staff in some areas are waiting to be called in for 'the talk'. Others are waiting for 'the letter'. Positions and entire services and units have disappeared over night. And all the time the state government has maintained the absolute number of sackings is unknown.

Hand on his heart, Premier Campbell Newman said: 'we need to make tough decisions before the end of September, we need to square this away, and then we've essentially executed this plan to get this state back on track - to actually make sure we've sorted out our finances'.

Which is all well and good, except Treasurer Tim Nicholls wrote to every minister in the second week of July – a fortnight ago – showing the level of savings and required staffing cuts that had already been approved by the Cabinet and Budget Review Committee.

They had previously been under consideration for almost a month while the departments have worked on their new management structures and focus.

But the final body count has always been known.

Certainly it may have been refined, with CBRC demanding more or fewer bodies. But there are no secrets.

In a small line in the list of approved savings from the Treasurer is the total number of positions to be 'downsized', or 'right sized' as noted in the Premier's media statement – so much nicer than sackings.

It seems very few words to determine the fate of thousands of employees.

There is also a nominated dollar figure as to how much each department is required to 'deliver in savings to meet the government's election commitment savings requirements'.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Drip becomes a flood': <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-politics/the-drip-becomes-a-flood-20120731-23c39.html>

So, the Premier's statement that he had told cabinet to sort it out by September is no more than political and media spin. Ministers already knew. This 'new' timing of Newman's allows him to exploit the distraction of the Olympic Games and the Ekka.

After that, there will be a raft of pre budget stories – so the human cost becomes merely part of the problem.

Many agencies have nominated August 31 as the date to finalise redundancies, which means there is a probability that there will be a wave of retrenchments in December. Certainly, you can expect more job losses as the review teams from the Public Sector Renewal Board sweep through departments – after all, they will have to deliver some bodies to justify their existence.

The government is also demanding another 3 per cent cut in corporate staff next year and again the following year. And while there has been much made about returning the state's AAA rating and paying off debt, there is one reason for the slash and burn that the government doesn't make too much of, but is central to the depth and breadth of the sackings; the government's demand that departments find the savings to fund the government's election commitments.

Let's be clear here – 20,000 people and their families are going to be sacrificed to pay for political promises. Somehow, I don't think that was clear during the election campaign. I might have missed it.

One senior public servant said there is a deep sense of despair and helplessness, from senior managers to the lowest level of administration.

'There is a lack of understanding as to why the changes and job losses are taking so long to be announced.

Friction between staff is on the increase, there is suspicion and a developing gap of understanding and communication between program areas, between operational and support staff, between central office and regional office and field staff and between corporate support and program areas.

Lists of redundant positions are finalised in most areas yet there is a real bottleneck in advising those staff of their futures. Staff are simply asking is to be treated with respect and consideration and be told the truth.

What needs to be understood is that this information cannot be released without the government's agreement, so politicians ensure that rumour and fear breed while they seek political advantage and convenience.

It is part and parcel of the crisis strategy used to justify the shock and awe assault on the public sector. It's the same as Newman has used on the state's financial situation.

To rebuild something, to restructure any organisation, first you have to trash it and then tear it down. Otherwise there's no kudos in it for the pollies. There are no votes in a managed and planned restructure.

It's difficult to imagine under what other circumstances you could orchestrate the sacking of 20,000 people – a figure is so huge that you need a special framework to deliver the slash and burn.

To put it into perspective, think of it this way: the state government is sacking just short of the entire city of Maryborough (population 23,263) or just short of half the population of the Premier's seat of Ashgrove (42,954) or 6000 more than the number who voted for him.

But a crisis, real or self-induced, has significant dangers.

If it has a shaky foundation – such as a report that might be seen as partisan – there is a serious risk that it will be exposed as, perhaps, not quite honest.

Having senior managers talk with staff who have been identified as surplus, while maintaining no-one knows how many will go, erodes what little trust is left. Public servants hear the spin but know the truth.

Overmanaging a crisis unleashes two dangerous reflexes in politicians. The first is that calm analysis is crowded out by political spin and uncertainty, doubt and dissent are no longer welcome, not even behind closed doors.

The second reflex, much loved by politicians of all persuasions, is to gag debate. Those who voice doubt about what is being done are sidelined, accused of politicking and discounted as apologists for old remedies.

Public servants have been subjected to one of the ugliest campaign of demonisation by orchestrated cheer squads.

These are campaigns by party machines who organise party members, provide them with the messaging and turn them loose on the internet. Political strategists used to stack talk back radio. The same now applies to news websites.

Trashing the state's financial reputation makes it difficult to go on trade missions spruiking the strength of the state's economy.

(Note to the Premier: The days when you could tell different audiences different facts disappeared with the development of communications technology. The difference between being a lord mayor and a state premier is that, as a premier, what you say matters on a local, national and sometimes, international level.)

Trashing the state's public sector is going to make the rebuilding of professional trust a long and difficult journey.

Here's some frank and fearless advice for the Assistant Minister for Technical and Further Education and Can Do Member for Mount Coot-tha Saxon Rice. Ms Rice was one of the fortunate few elected first-time MPs who copped an immediate \$24,500 pay rise by being appointed an assistant minister. If you are telling everyone in your department to save money by printing on both sides and black and white, don't have a glossy four page flyer delivered in your electorate. It sends the message of 'do as I say and I'll do as I want'. Secondly, if you must do it, then try not to have 11 photographs of yourself in the first three pages. When you are boasting about what you have helped to achieve – as all politicians do whether they have had a hand in it or not – you might want to acknowledge the sacking of public servants.

Lastly, don't ask people to complete an LNP survey asking them how they voted or what party they supported. Many would see it as an unwelcome and unwanted intrusion and be likely to tell you to mind your own business.

#### **4 The 'Road to Recovery' on the bodies of sacked workers<sup>5</sup> 12 September 2012**

A lot of good people lost their jobs yesterday.

Managers had the job of delivering the talk. Staff were told that it's not their fault and has nothing to do with their work performance. But they are, as politicians are fond of saying (because it sounds so much more pleasant) 'surplus to requirements'.

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<sup>5</sup> 'The road to recovery on the bodies of sacked workers': *Brisbane Times*, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/road-to-recovery-on-the-bodies-of-sacked-workers-20120911-25qem.html>



You'd like to think it was for a good reason. You would like to think that. But at the end of the day, it wasn't about the triple AAA credit rating or paying back debt. It was a brutal body counting exercise – 14,000 jobs to fund the government's election promises.

The reason for the slash and burn was never in doubt. It was made clear in the letters from the treasurer in July to all ministers. Just as it was clear in internal cabinet and Budget Review Committee documents that departments are expected to deliver another 3 per cent staff cuts in 2013-14; 3 per cent in 2014-15 and 3 per cent in 2015-16. This was about generating savings to meet election promises. The road to recovery will be on the bodies of sacked workers.

The total of 20,000 public servants was nominated as the number the state couldn't afford. In the end, the government claimed credit for 'saving' 6,000 jobs and only sacking 14,000.

The unions claimed credit for saving 6,000 jobs and only having 14,000 people sacked. There are a couple of ways to read how the government manipulated this number as part of a political and media strategy. Firstly that the government indulged in an old, but vicious and deliberate manipulation of fear in its workforce. That is, talk it up – a bit along the lines of the over the top Spain and bankruptcy rhetoric – and then, at the last moment, sweep in and 'save' 6000 jobs.

The problem with these strategies is that they are well known. And when political and media strategies are identified, they become more of a liability because, for obvious reasons, no one believes them. Former federal treasurer Peter Costello's report falls with in the same category.

There is a second suggestion that the government had this number in mind before the Costello report was delivered. In May, a briefing note was prepared for Housing and Public Works Minister Bruce Flegg, on the financial case for the sale/redevelopment of the 1 William Street site – otherwise to be known as Project X. In the document, there is a list of bullet point assumptions. Among those assumptions is that there will be a reduction in the public sector of 20,000 and the number expanding to 22,000 by 2017.

The Costello report, which doesn't actually canvas the sacking of public servants, only came out in June. Despite what some ministers would have you believe, public servants do not go off and prepare material on a whim. It is under direct instructions from the minister or ministerial staff – including the assumptions.

As you watch the human cost of this purge you realise how little comfort can be taken from the words you offer and how puerile most of the political rhetoric is in the face of the personal destruction.