

The policy chaos eroding our faith in democracy

Extracts from SMH article by Jess Irvine 19 November 2018

In the first of a five-part series, *The Future Fix*, we examine how knee-jerk politics is fuelling mistrust in our political system – but also sparking a search for fresh solutions.



Recently, as president of the Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA), Peter Shergold surveyed more than 800 IPAA conference attendees, mostly current and former public servants.

Just two in five felt they delivered projects well and made effective use of taxpayers' money. Almost half said their institutions had become more political.

The majority said ministerial advisers played too great a role in governance (60 per cent), and 70 per cent thought the same of consultants.

Most worryingly, just 30 per cent thought the public service remained "frank and fearless".

Shergold says there is a "rising tribalisation of Australian politics and culture". "In this 'post-truth' world, the value of a skilled public administration, trained in looking at all sides of a political proposition in a considered and thoughtful manner, is no longer regarded as a civic virtue."

Losing the democratic faith

Public faith in democracy in Australia is in decline, according to a range of recent surveys.

“There’s a perception that the government is run for big interests, and that politicians are looking after themselves rather than governing on behalf of the people they are elected to represent.”

The head of CEDA, Melinda Cilento, says Australia is suffering a “democratic disconnect”.

“No matter how impressive we feel our track record of growth has been, very few people feel that they personally have gained much.” The hostility to business is particularly troubling, says Cilento.

Jennifer Westacott, the chief executive of the Business Council of Australia, is scathing of the “often very poor process” by which public policies are formulated today, citing the lack of a business case for the NBN. Energy policy, she says, is “a mess”.

A “basic competency” issue

In 2012, former NSW Treasury secretary Percy Allan oversaw the release of a study titled “Public policy adrift”. It rated 18 public policies against whether they met the Wiltshire test (devised by University of Queensland academic Kenneth Wiltshire) for good public policy development: including establishing a clear need for policy reform, creating a green paper identifying reform options, extensive public consultation, producing a white paper with reform recommendations, and having a strategic communication strategy to convince voters of the merits of a reform.

Ten out of 18 policies assessed failed the test, including the NBN and the GFC stimulus “Building the Education Revolution” and home-insulation programs.

“Good policy is not a left-right issue; it is an issue of basic competency.”
Simon Breheny

This year, the study was repeated – in a novel fashion. In an Australian first, think tanks from opposite ends of the ideological divide – the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs and the left-wing Per Capita - came together to assess the rigour of the development process behind 20 policies.

There was striking agreement, with both think tanks identifying four policies, in particular, that showed an “unacceptable” level of rigour: the same-sex marriage postal survey, the decision to [create a federal Home Affairs department](#), the NSW government’s [local council mergers policy](#) and the Queensland government’s [laws on vegetation management](#).

“Good policy process – from actually undertaking cost-benefit analysis to having a detailed plan for how a policy will be rolled out – is not a left-right issue; it is an issue of basic competency,” says the IPA’s director of policy, Simon Breheny.

From Westminster to Washminster

Allan, who now consults to the private and public sector, points the finger at the growing role of political advisers in perverting the policy process, crowding out the advice of public servants.

“The situation now is that ministers have more advisers in their private ministerial offices. Many of them are recruited from politically affiliated lobbying and polling organisations where the skill set is political analysis and marketing rather than policy making,” says Allan.

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Percy Allan

“Australia has gradually moved from a traditional UK Westminster government to a polyglot Washminster model that borrows from the Washington style of public administration.”

In Washington, Allan explains, top bureaucrats are political appointees: “It’s only from the middle to lower tiers of public service management that American public servants are recruited on merit, not political affiliation. In America, there is an army of senior public thinkers who move between the bureaucracy (when their chief is president or governor) and think tanks (such as the Brookings Institution when their party is out of power).

“This has advantages (e.g. bright people committed to a government's agenda are in charge of effecting policy) and disadvantages (e.g. ideologues take control of the administrative apparatus of public policy-making and override evidence and consultation in advancing solutions to complex problems).”

So where to from here?

Amid an increasing sense of policy chaos, a new microcosm is forming around finding ways to fix Australian democracy.

Percy Allan just wants politicians to return to the old way of doing things, committing to an evidence-based policy-making process run more by public servants and less by “political cabals”.

“That involves establishing the known facts and stakeholder views about a situation, identifying the alternative policy options, weighing up their pros and cons, sharing that with the public and inviting its reaction, after which finalising a policy position to put before Parliament or effect by regulation,” says Allan.

Winning back public trust in the process of government is crucial, he says: “I believe the public has turned against government not so much over policy but the way policy is decided, announced and executed.”

Peter Shergold agrees the public service needs to restore its policy advising capabilities while partnering more with business and community groups to get their views.

“In today’s uncertain environment,” he says, “the ability of public administrators to serve successive governments in an apolitical manner has become significantly more important to the healthy functioning of the machinery of democratic government.”

A campaign is also needed, says Shergold, to restate the importance of a rigorous, independent public service as “central to the operations of the maintenance of a civil society” and as “bedrock of democratic governance”.

CEDA’s Cilento says public policy decision-making will need to become more transparent, involving more engagement with citizens, to restore public trust in democracy.

Full article: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-policy-chaos-eroding-our-faith-in-democracy-20181115-p50g8l.html>

See also ‘Per Capita’ analysis of NSW Government’s council amalgamations policy: <https://savehuntershill.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/socc-per-capita-policy-analysis-of-nsw-council-amalgamations-sept-2018.pdf>